Harry Potter and the Problem of Potions

by Wyste

Summary
Once upon a time, Harry Potter hid for two hours from Dudley in a chemistry classroom, while a nice graduate student explained about the scientific method and interesting facts about acids. A pebble thrown into the water causes ripples.

Contains, in no particular order: magic candymaking, Harry falling in love with a house, evil kitten Draco Malfoy, and Hermione attempting to apply logic to the wizarding world.

Notes
See the end of the work for notes.
The problem, or perhaps the solution, was that Harry fell in love with Potions. He’d never been particularly interested in school before, being preoccupied with avoiding Dudley, chores, avoiding Dudley, keeping the peace with his relatives to avoid his uncle’s version of child rearing, and avoiding Dudley.

Which all came down to Harry being really frustrated, the third time Neville melted a cauldron in Potions, because it distracted him from his own brewing and turned his yellow potion an odd mustard color.

Unacceptable. Yelling at Neville didn’t help, Hermione helping Neville just got points taken off both of them….

Obviously, the solution was a study group outside of class, where Hermione could show Neville things to her heart’s content, and Harry could practice.

Which is how, through a series of trial and error, Ron ended up begging the twins to show them where they did their illegal potion brewing, because Professor McGonagall was not impressed with their impromptu study group. It turned out to be in the caved-in entrance of a secret tunnel, which was wicked. Neville, Hermione, and Ron weren’t as keen to use it at all hours and at odd hours to experiment with different potions they’d learned, were learning, or would learn, but that was okay. Neville was far calmer in class when he’d already made the potion semi-successfully before, and Hermione got her urge to tutor out of the way before class, which meant Harry could concentrate on his potion. With Snape yelling at Neville a little less, three things became apparent:

1. Most of the class was terrible at potions.
2. Draco got points for Slytherin because he was actually good at Potions.
3. Snide or not, Snape’s commentary on Harry’s abysmal Potions skills actually was good advice, if you ignored almost everything he said.

Harry became quite good at ignoring everything his Potions professor said.

The hell of it was, even Hermione couldn’t figure out how Draco got potions that extra bit of the way from ‘the right general color’ to ‘giving off smoke in attractive shades’ and ‘getting Slytherin 10 points, the slimy git.’

By the time Halloween rolled around, Harry was frustrated enough that he was spending his dinner trying five different variations, and was trying to withstand the sinking feeling that he was going to have to ask Draco Malfoy for advice.

It was, obviously, still better than asking Professor Snape for advice, because he wasn’t suicidal. But it was still bad.

Which is how, with him coming from one direction mourning the death of his dignity and pride, and Hermione and Ron coming from the other direction, they ended up fighting a mountain troll in the hallway outside the girl’s toilets.

Neville had been deputized to go find an adult, which was great, since Harry needed an adult, what with the excessive amount of bleeding he was doing. Neville even found Professor Quirrell, who turned out to be exceedingly good at cutting curses. Bye, troll!

After that, they were really friends, especially Hermione and Ron. Who had, apparently, turned their
impromptu alliance into a pact to keep Harry from getting himself killed by forgetting to eat meals or running headlong into trolls.

Professor Snape was really awful about Harry running into the troll in the next Potions class, too.

“I suppose you thought it would be heroic to fight a troll, Potter?”

“No, professor, I was working on studying for the Strengthening Solution—“

“A point from Gryffindor for an obvious lie.”

Or something like that. Harry really hated that he was Harry’s favorite professor. Why couldn’t he have liked Professor McGonagall and learned how to turn into an owl, like a sane person.
Harry’s friends cruelly abandoned him to talk to Draco, on the theory that it was his own stupid plan. Traitors.

(A small voice inside his head pointed out he’d never had friends to be traitors before, and he should be grateful. The little voice that told him he was ungrateful for things always sounded like his Aunt. He tuned it out, with long practice.)

“How could I not, for the hero of Gryffindor?”

“…that was sarcasm, right?”

“Yes, Potter, it was sarcasm. Good job.”

Draco was a git. Harry attempted to smile, which made Draco eye him as if he was a mountain troll. Great.

“Look, you’re, um.” Argh. “Join my Potions study group.”

Draco’s expression turned complex.

“Why?”

“Because.”

“Why, Potter.”

“Because you’re better at Potions than me,” Harry said in one long miserable breath.

Draco smiled. Like a lizard.

“No, Potter. I think I can figure it out on my own, thanks.”

And Draco walked off humming to himself.

Harry was halfway back to his dormitory before he figured it out, and so he was redfaced and sputtering with rage when he tried to explain why Draco Malfoy was the absolute worst to Ron and Neville.

“He’s worse than my cousin Dudley,” Harry said fervently. “I didn’t think anyone could be that awful.”

“You know we have half a foot due for Defense Against the Dark Arts tomorrow, don’t you?” Hermione asked, from where she was studying for a class that wasn’t Potions. (He really didn’t understand Hermione sometimes.)

Morosely, Harry went to get his parchment.

Draco was still looking smug the next morning, the lizard. And in Potions the next week, while he
was waiting for his own potion to stew, he wandered over to Harry’s to peer at it.

“You’re cutting your roots wrong,” Draco said, with a blissful smile, and then wandered back to his potion, humming that dratted song under his breath again.

There were two different sets of roots on Harry’s workbench. He eyed them with disfavor, because they were all already cut up, and he’d been sure it said to cut one lengthwise and the other widthwise, and they had to be added – half a minute ago, Draco had thrown off his timing entirely.

“A point from Gryffindor for inattention to detail, Potter,” Snape said from behind his shoulder. Harry jumped, and dropped half his roots in his potion all at once.

The cauldron melted.

Draco Malfoy was the worst.
Two Arguments

Chapter Summary

I've always found Crabbe and Goyle fascinating, though they get so little screen time in the books, and I have a favorite fanon about Goyle that will come into play here. I tend to feel that the shorthand of large+fat+unattractive=evil is pretty lazy, so we'll be looking at that, though it won't be the focus of the story.

"Leave Draco alone."

Harry jumped, grabbing for his wand. He'd thought he was alone in the corridor, heading downstairs towards the statue that housed his precious Potions lab, but here was one of Draco's minions. Looming. Harry swallowed, and lifted his chin. He would not have a Dudley flashback. He wouldn't.

"I never talk to Draco," Harry said. "I mean, Malfoy."

Goyle seemed to process this. It took a long time.

"Leave Draco alone," he repeated.

"I'll leave Draco alone," Harry said, "If he leaves me alone. And helps me with Potions."

If he was being honest.

"No."

"No, what?"

"He's not going to help you with Potions."

"Why not?"

Another long, processing silence. Goyle took a couple steps forward, and loomed down at him. Harry glared up at him. He was a wizard now. Wizards weren't bullied, they dueled.

"Draco's too busy to help you," Goyle said, eventually. "And important."

"We're eleven."

Harry was really beginning to hate the long silences Goyle needed in between his thoughts.

"If you bother Draco, you'll be sorry."

Harry stared in puzzlement at Goyle's back, as he swept away down the stairs, trying to look portentous and menacing. It... really didn't work. Draco's friends, he thought to himself, were really weird. What did it say about Harry, that Draco had wanted to be friends with him?

Nothing good, probably.
"Professor Snape wouldn't try to steal anything, he's a teacher," argued Hermione, keeping her voice
down because of the Sacred Library Rules.

Ron's rambling argument in reply boiled down to 'Greasy git's obviously up to something.'

"But, look, even if he was up to something." Harry said weakly, because he agreed that Professor
Snape was pretty obviously evil, "Maybe Headmaster Dumbledore knows about it and, um, indulges
it? Like Hagrid. Hagrid does stuff that's pretty, er."

The other kids sitting around the table nodded. Hagrid did do things that were er.

"But Professor Snape is wizard at potions, so maybe it's just one of those things you put up with,
when you're Headmaster. The way Professor Binns is a ghost. I mean, being evil doesn't mean you
can't be a good teacher, right?"

"But he's an awful teacher," pointed out Ron. "Really, really awful."

Neville just looked miserable, and glanced over his shoulder out of justified paranoia that speaking
Professor Snape's name would summon him. (It happened more often than you would think.)

"I think," Hermione said slowly, "That there's a difference between doing evil and being evil. Even
if Professor Snape is evil, which I don't think is true, someone needs to stop him from doing evil - oh,
you're all ridiculous, I mean even if he were made of pure darkness, he still shouldn't be allowed to
steal things. That's ethics."

"Cor, Hermione," Ron said admiringly. Harry had to agree. Hermione was pretty brilliant
sometimes.

"What could we even do, though?" Neville asked.

The conversation turned towards what they could do, then, and Harry made a mental note to come
back to the idea of evil. Maybe you could distill evil somehow, in a Potion? He'd ask Professor
Snape after they thwarted his dire plot.
Harry wanting to learn Potions would not actually make Harry a very happy camper in Book One, if you think about it.

*Magical Drafts and Potions* by Arsenius Jigger was almost as bad a textbook as Professor Snape was a professor. The text was dense, the diagrams were old-fashioned, and Harry had to ask Hermione what half the words meant, and she eventually admitted that when she'd first read it over the summer, she'd had to use a dictionary to look up a lot of the longer words, which weren't used anymore in the muggle world. It explained a lot about how well everyone did in Potions class, Harry thought.

Luckily for Harry's temper, which grew shorter with every chapter he struggled through with no further luck at actually learning something from the book, good potion brewing involved a lot of crushing things, slicing things into small pieces, and making things blow up. The latter Harry hadn't realized you could do on purpose, but Fred clued him in. ("I think otherwise little Harry-kins is going to melt the good cauldron, George, and we can't have that.") Being able to make red and orange fireworks whenever he got too frustrated by alchemical theory went a long way towards reminding him of the long game.

Harry throwing his textbook across the Gryffindor common room one winter night brought the laughter and talk through the room to a grinding halt. It was Neville, keeping a wary eye on Harry, who retrieved it and dusted it off, offering it to him with a uneasy gleam in his eye.

Harry glared at him.

Neville swallowed, and said in a rush, "Fantastic beasts and where to find them."

"...what?"

"You should read *Fantastic Beasts and Where To Find Them*, instead. The profiles list what potions include parts as ingredients, like dragon's blood. *1001 Herbs and Fungi* does, too, but you'd like Fantastic Beasts better."

"I would, would I?"

"Yes. So you should stop scaring everyone, and read something else," Neville said, and then turned pale and wide-eyed, apparently pretending very hard that he hadn't said anything.

Harry looked at Ron, whose shoulders were hunched and who was pretending not to be there, and winced. Hermione was apparently engrossed in a book, but her hair was covering her face, not pushed back behind her ears the way it normally was.

"Sorry, guys," he said.

He went to get his other books, leaving his classmates to their own tasks and games. As he climbed the stairs to fetch his things from his trunk, Harry couldn't help thinking, *Neville's a really good friend.*
It said something a little sad about Harry's life that someone trying to knock him off a broomstick at a Quidditch match didn't quite top his priority list. If anything, it was reassuring, because the rest of Hogwarts was so interesting and wonderful that he'd begin to think it was all a lovely dream if his favorite professor weren't quite possibly trying to murder him. Christmas coming 'round topped his list, with the possibility of two weeks of flying, brewing, researching Nicholas Flamel, and working on memorizing everything in *1001 Herbs and Fungi* out of sheer spite. Harry hadn't really found very much time to sleep lately.

"Do you think Professor Snape would like a Chocolate Frog?" Harry asked Ron, the week before Christmas break.

"Well, I suppose if he could poison it and give it back to you," Ron said. "Why?"

Ron was under the impression Harry went looking for trouble. It wasn't fair. One troll and one (five) tiny incident with Goyle trying to knock him down the stairs, and suddenly Harry was a trouble magnet.

"It's Christmas," Harry said. "You can give professors things at Christmas, can't you?"

"Not ones who are trying to kill you."

"We aren't sure about that."

Ron gave him an incredibly unimpressed look, and Harry ended up promising not to try to come up with a present that would convince Snape to teach him Potions and not murder him.

It seemed like that would be a bit of a leap in terms of Christmas presents anyway. Maybe a love potion...?

A little reading about love potions later, Harry decided to reserve that idea for an emergency.

#

Two days before Christmas Break, Vincent Crabbe caught Harry as he was falling down the stairs. They fell over in a pile, and then Harry scrambled up and away, and Crabbe pushed himself up - and up, and up - to his feet.

"Malfoy's looking for you," Crabbe said, looking up the stairs at Goyle.

"Right," said Goyle, trotting down the stairs, expression still stuck on 'agreeable troll.' Harry put his back to the wall.

"You shouldn't push him down the stairs," Crabbe said, as they walked away without looking at Harry.

"But we hate him."

"If Malfoy wanted him pushed down the stairs, he'd do it himself."

"...no, he wouldn't."

"Well, he'd talk someone into doing it, but the point is, he doesn't want-"
They were out of earshot. Harry sagged back against the wall, and looked forward to Christmas break even more than he had been.

What did Draco want, if he didn't want Harry pushed down the stairs? One more mystery in a pile that was getting no lighter.
Christmas break was brilliant, and far too short. Far too soon, Harry was back to dealing with the lizard and his lizard minions. One evening, after Malfoy jinxed Neville....

“There’s no need to tell me I’m not brave enough to be Gryffindor, Malfoy’s already done that.”

Harry offered Neville a chocolate frog.

“You’re worth twelve of Malfoy. Anyway, you always stand up to me. Unless Malfoy’s just scarier than I am?”

Neville smiled weakly.

“You’re way scarier than Malfoy, but that’s different.”

“Why?”

“...I dunno,” Neville said, looking faintly thoughtful, which was an improvement over looking near tears. “I think I’ll go to bed. D’you want the card, you collect them, don’t you?”

#

Malfoy stopped by Harry’s potions bench the first week back from Christmas break, expression innocently benevolent.

“My father’s arranged with Professor Snape for me to have private tutoring in Potions. Professor Snape says I have potential.” Malfoy lowered his voice. “Maybe if you had a father, you could ask him to help you. Oh, wait.”

Malfoy didn’t have a chance to finish his little speech, because Harry tackled him, though Ron tugged him off again pretty quickly. Horrible bully-

“Five points from Gryffindor and detention, Potter,” Snape said, something very close to delight slithering through his tone. “For conduct unbecoming a Hogwarts student and disrupting my classroom.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, gritting his teeth and trying not to think about it. He was pretty sure his temper didn’t used to be this short, but Draco had a talent.

“Oops, I broke Draco’s vials,” Ron said, in a wavering voice, drawing everyone’s attention to where he was standing next to Draco’s desk. As they watched, he tipped Draco’s potions equipment onto the floor, where it shattered.

There was quite a lot of yelling, after that.
“Well,” Ron said to Harry in an undertone, after they’d been given detention and told to report to their head of house, “I couldn’t let you have detention with him by yourself, could I? He’d have a perfect chance to kill you without any witnesses.”

“You think witnesses will stop him?”

Ron went quiet after that, apparently not having thought that one through. This was why Ron was Harry’s best friend, even if Hermione and Neville were pretty great. If Harry jumped off a cliff, Ron would jump off after him and they’d figure out how not to die on the way down.

#

Snape seemed to find having Harry in detention positively blissful. For the first time since the year started, he smiled as he graded homework at his desk, as Ron and Harry scrubbed caked slugs out of cauldrons and tried not to inhale the noxious fumes of the cleaning solution.

When they were done, Snape had a look at their work, smiled at them (both Harry and Ron recoiled in terror), and said, “Unacceptable. Start over.”

“Professor, that isn’t fair,” Harry said.

“Very few things in life are.”

Maybe this will bring me one step closer to being a Potions master, Harry thought morosely, trying to talk himself out of yelling at his teacher. Professor Snape’s eyebrows inched infinitesimally upwards, before the professor looked away, breaking eye contact.

At the end of a long, miserable evening, Professor Snape said, “Potter.”

“Yes, professor?” Harry said, glancing at Ron, who lingered determined in the doorway.

“In the interest of you learning a modicum of discipline, you are welcome to assist in classroom cleanup at the end of each day,” Snape said flatly.

Harry blinked at him owlishly.

“Wipe that idiotic look off your face.” Harry wondered if this was more or less likely to give Professor Snape an opportunity or motive to murder him. Snape’s expression soured. “I do not eat students, no matter what the Weasley twins may have told you.”

Professor Snape did read minds. He knew it.

The professor smiled. It was not a pleasant expression.

“Gottago, bye professor!”

Harry didn’t think Gryffindor courage required him to be that suicidal. He fled, grabbing Ron’s arm as he went.

Chapter End Notes

Snape’s recorded as following Harry around to try to keep him alive in the latter half of
Philosopher's Stone, in between teaching seven year's worth of students and trying to keep an eye on Quirrell. Imagine, if you will, Snape realizing that he can just lock Harry in a quiet room doing something humiliating for a few hours every evening, and then having Harry give him the key that lets him manipulate Harry into doing it of his own accord. Harry isn't the only one short of time and sleep this year, I bet. I imagine Snape juggling putting up with Harry in the same room against Harry not running off god knows where to fight trolls and be murdered, and deciding you have to do what you have to do.
Perspectives on a Different Potter

The Twins

Harry Potter was going to get himself killed one of these days and leave their little brother a broken-hearted mess of red mop. Very friendly, weirdly driven, a devil on a broom and a big-eyed black-haired mop when you showed him how to make candy that changed the color of your tongue.

McGonagall

If Harry Potter didn't stop reading 101 Famous Potion-Makers in her class, she was going to start wondering about his House loyalty.

Quirrell

He didn't have anything personally against the boy, and he was quite busy, so it was only mildly irritating not to find another opportunity to murder him as the spring term went along.

Goyle

Draco wanted Potter to be his minion. Greg was already Draco's minion. Potter would take Draco over Greg's dead body.

(Greg was not a very complicated thinker.)
In Which Snape Loses His Temper

Harry honestly didn’t have time to scrub cauldrons and inventory packets of things for Professor Snape, between Quidditch practice and classes and researching the Philosopher’s Stone. The potions study group fell apart, Neville not having time for anything but passing his classes and Harry not having time for anything, but on the theory that you might be able to pick up Potions by mind reading somehow, if you concentrate, Harry tried to concentrate on potions secrets while making sure there were precisely thirty porcupine quills in each packet, and that there were precisely thirty packets.

It was incredibly boring, and every time Professor Snape looked at him he thought of the most embarrassing thing he could think of that he didn’t want Professor Snape to know about, like all the times he and Ron called Professor Snape a greasy git.

Maybe if he threw himself off the astronomy tower life would be less embarrassing.

“What’s he doing here?” Draco Malfoy’s unmistakable voice asked, on Friday evening while Harry was scrubbing the counters.

“Reveling in mediocrity,” Snape said dryly. “Attend to your own work, Mister Malfoy. You have the assignment for me?”

Harry eavesdropped shamelessly as they discussed the usage of different sorts of knives in preparing potion ingredients. It would have been really wonderful except for, oh, right, Malfoy.

#

The only thing of interest that happened before what Harry forever after thought of as the Thing With The Dragon was one morning before Potions class, when Professor Snape paused next to his workbench and sniffed audibly. Harry glanced up at the professor, whose expression was unreadable, and Snape strode onwards as if nothing had happened.

At the end of the lesson, Snape said, “Potter, attend.”

Harry went up to the front of the classroom. Professor Snape eyed him. Harry shifted nervously, and stilled. Courage. You had to have courage, didn’t you? And he didn’t think he’d actually done anything Professor Snape wouldn’t like, not this week, anyway….

“Potter. Why, precisely, do you smell of smoke and citrus?”

Probably the potion last night, where he’d substituted the rose hips for the usual dittany to see if he could change the color of the fireworks.

“Just an experiment, professor,” Harry said, studying the way one of Snape’s fingers seemed tempted to tap on the table.

“An experiment.”

“Fred and George taught me.”

“And where, precisely, have you been conducting unauthorized potions experiments?”

Harry glanced up to meet Snape’s eyes, surprised by the venom in his tone. He knew the professor...
hated him, but lately it was a little less obvious.

“An unused room, professor.”

“By the smell lingering around you, an unused room with neither the proper shielding nor adequate ventilation. Let me be very clear, you little suicidal idiot. If you do not cease your constant attempts to murder yourself, I will be forced to intervene, at which time you will wish you were dead. Am I being entirely clear, Mister Potter?”

“Yes, sir. Very clear.”

“Fred and George Weasley are the very worst examples you could follow. Attempt studying, Mister Potter. I am almost certain you will not be able to do yourself in in the library, though I trust you to amaze me at some point.”

There really wasn’t very much Harry could say to that.

“Get out of my sight.”

Harry got out of his sight, trying to figure that out. It was sort of cheering that apparently Professor Snape didn’t want him dead, though of course he could be lying, but it didn’t seem like he was lying….

If Professor Snape wasn’t the one trying to kill him, that meant someone else wanted to kill him. Harry really didn’t know what he’d done to all these people. He was just trying to study magic!
The Thing With The Dragon

In the rush to revise for exams, and because Professor Snape was being even more dire than usual, Harry found himself in the library with Hermione, Ron, and Neville instead of in the Potions classroom or Fred and George’s secret lair. By mutual consent, after the first time Neville failed an exam because they’d been distracting him with Philosopher’s Stone research they’d started leaving him out of it, but he was very much included in revising. He was better than both Ron and Harry at History of Magic and Herbology, and Harry was better than Ron and Neville at Potions and Defense. None of them were better than Hermione at anything, of course, and Ron edged out Harry and Neville at Transfiguration. Which is where they encountered Hagrid, looking up dragons.

A few speaking looks between Harry, Ron, and Hermione left Hermione to study with Neville and Harry and Ron to go investigate, on the theory that that was incredibly suspicious.

It was only once they got back to Hermione to discuss it that she pointed out that Hagrid lived in a wooden house, and then it seemed a little less exciting.

Still really exciting, but a little less exciting.

And then Malfoy would overhear them talking about it, before the hatching. So he could witness it, and then he kept watching Harry, and Harry would really prefer to scream now and worry about people thinking he was mad later. And then Ron was bitten and Malfoy had the letter and at that point Harry decided that there was no point panicking because things definitely were just going to be awful, so there was no reason worrying about it. It’s not like he didn’t have experience with awful, after all.

Which is why it was rather strange, while Harry was waiting anxiously for Peeves to clear the Great Hall so they could go outside to fetch Norbert for Charlie, for Malfoy to sit down next to him and say, matter-of-factly, “Potter, you idiot, you can’t do this. You’ll be expelled.”

“Keep your voice down,” Harry hissed at him.

“Don’t tell me what to do, Potter,” Malfoy said, smiling that slow, lizard-like smile of his.

“…I’d have thought you’d be perfectly happy with us being expelled, Malfoy.”

“If you’re expelled, I can’t humiliate you at Potions, can I? So stop being stupidly sentimental and leave him to dig his own grave.”

“Some people have friends, Malfoy. Not minions or, or the right sort. Real friends.”

Malfoy glanced appraisingly at Hermione, and instead of replying, said, “Don’t try anything, Potter. He dug his own grave, you know.”

“You can’t stop us,” said Hermione quietly.

“McGonagall can. Easily.”

“And then we get expelled, which you don’t want,” whispered Harry. “So maybe you should help us.”

“Harry, think about this,” said Hermione worriedly.
“Look, Draco,” Harry hurried on, “Aren’t you supposed to like dragons or something? It’s in your name, even. You’re probably a dragon animagus.”

This argument did not appear to compel Draco to change his mind one whit, but he didn’t argue back immediately, eyebrows inching upwards in a way that reminded Harry unsettlingly of Snape.

“I have a way to do it,” Harry said, “You know, secret, chosen one, boy-who-lived magic stuff. I’m not going to get caught.”

There was a beat of silence as everyone looked at Harry, before Draco started snickering helplessly.

“That was the most pathetic lie I’ve ever heard,” he managed inbetween giggles.

Harry turned red.

“Since you’ve begged for my help so nicely, I suppose I’ll rescue you from yourselves. Now, what’s your awful plan?”

Harry and Hermione glanced at each other uneasily. No way did they want to tell Draco Malfoy about the invisibility cloak.

“You can’t curse me in the middle of the Great Hall,” Draco pointed out. “Not with Peeves right there. I’m not an idiot.”

“No one thinks you’re an idiot,” soothed Hermione. Draco gave her a look. “Just… rude,” she finished weakly.

“I’m rude, he mouthed to himself, and rolled his eyes.

“Where are your goons, anyway?” asked Harry.

“They’re not my babysitters, Potter.” A meditative pause. “Rather the opposite, really. And tonight I apparently have to babysit you, so here we go.”

“We don’t need your help, Malfoy.”

“No, but you do need my silence. And I want to meet a dragon.” He smiled, and Harry wanted to punch him in the teeth. “I have a special bond with dragons, remember?”

“Only if you promise not to talk about anything you see tonight, with anyone,” Harry said. “At all.”

“My word as a Malfoy,” Draco said genially, as if he’d been practicing it all his life.

“Right.”

Which is how they ended up taking Draco with them under the invisibility cloak to rescue the dragon, and he whined. The whole way. At least Charlie’s friends were wonderful. So basically it was a lovely night, at least until they tumbled down the stairs and realized two things: they’d left the invisibility cloak behind, and Draco bloody Malfoy was nowhere to be seen.

50 points from Gryffindor each, and Draco Malfoy had Harry’s cloak. Norbert had better grow up to lay golden eggs or something.

#

In the morning, over breakfast, Malfoy ambled over and offered Harry a bundled up black cloak.
“You left this behind, I think,” he said, smiling like a lizard at the House Points in their giant hourglasses. All the Gryffindors at the table were giving Harry a look of absolute death. Harry hunched his shoulders, and grabbed his cloak back, shooting Malfoy an uncertain look.

“You weren’t going to try to keep it?”

“Don’t be absurd, Potter. As if I’d take something that was obviously a family heirloom.”

Harry eyed him.

“When you knew it was me and I’d get caught, anyway,” Draco added. “I’m not a saint.”

Harry nodded agreeably at this.

“Get lost, Malfoy.”

“Congratulations on tanking Gryffindor’s chances at the House Cup, Potter,” Draco added more loudly. “Couldn’t have done it better myself.”

Except, of course, he had done it, the rotter, Harry thought as he moved a corner of the black cloak and saw shining silver cloth. By helping, so Harry wasn’t even sure he could complain about it.

Harry’s year did not improve from there.
In another reality, Draco and Neville both had detention with Harry and Hermione, and so through a series of events Harry met a centaur named Firenze who warned him about Voldemort.

In this reality, only Harry and Hermione had detention, and so the only thing that happened was Hermione crying over a dead unicorn.

This made coming to the end of the traps that held the Philosopher's Stone an exciting surprise for Harry. His going theory was that Professor Snape didn't want him dead, but did want the Philosopher's Stone for some reason.

Exams came and went. Harry remembered precisely how to make a Forgetfulness Potion and couldn't even find it in himself to be proud of it, what with the stabbing headache.

And then Dumbledore was called away, and Harry had to decide whether to try to steal the Stone. In another reality, this was an easy decision, because the other option was death by Voldemort. In this reality, the conversation went a little differently....

"Look, I know you two hate him, but he's the best teacher I've ever had, and I can't let him get fired just because he thinks he needs a Philosopher's Stone for some stupid reason. So I'll get it, and I'll give it to Dumbledore tomorrow, and it will be as if nothing ever happened." He thought about Dumbledore, and a mirror. "Dumbledore will understand."

"I don't. We can't just go doing whatever we please just because the Headmaster's away. Professor McGonagall will skin us," Hermione said.

"It's about ethics," Harry said, trying to put something he felt that was very complicated into words. "Just because no one else knows it's the right thing to do doesn't make it not right. So I've got to do it, I know I do." And he thought about someone who wasn't Professor Snape, who'd tried to kill him, and he added, "Don't worry about me, I'll be fine."

Ron huffed in exasperation. "That's torn it."

Hermione nodded, looking morose.

"What's this about?"

"Hermione and I made a promise to keep you out of trouble," Ron said. "And I reckon we can't hex you."

Ron looked rather as if he liked the hexing plan.

"We can't let someone evil get their hands on a philosopher's stone," Harry tried, looking to Hermione for support. "Someone who's been killing unicorns."

Which was a guess, and he was a horrible person, but the way she paled and then nodded - well. He'd make it up to her somehow, if they all lived. The laughter from his dreams echoed at him mockingly, and his scar hurt.

#

After everything, Draco Malfoy came to visit him in the hospital wing. He didn't say anything, he
just looked at Harry.

"I suppose you're mad at me for beating him," Harry said tiredly. "Are you going to try to push me down the stairs too?"

Something in Draco's posture relaxed.

"You're as off your rocker as the headmaster," Draco drawled. "Congratulations on nearly getting yourself killed, I suppose."

"Thanks," Harry said, laddening it with as much sarcasm as he could.

"Who pushed you down the stairs?"

"Goyle. I think he thought he was doing you a favor or something. He stopped, though."

"That doesn't sound like Greg."

"Well, how should I know what he wanted? He tried to push me down the stairs, he stopped."

"Mm. Probably jealous. You are my rival, after all."

"I'm your what."

"My rival. My hopelessly outclassed rival, endlessly striving to live up to my standards."

Harry stared at him.

"I think I'll join the Slytherin Quidditch team next year," Draco mused. "Just so there's nothing you can do that I'm not better at, you understand. Show you how it's done, but properly."

"You're just upset I'm on the Quidditch team and you aren't, lizard."

"Yes," Draco drawled. "I do think it's unfair that your Head of House broke the rules like that, I'm glad you agree."

"Professor McGonagall didn't—" started Harry.

"Put a first year on the Quidditch team, for absolutely no good reason?"

"Why do you have to be such a prat all the time?" Harry hissed.

"Your secret, chosen one, boy-who-lived magic stuff influence, of course," Draco said, smirking. Harry had the horrible sinking feeling that that wasn't the last time Draco would quote him on that. 

It was with that conversation in mind that, upon the addition of House Points for Gryffindor thanks to stopped Quirrell and Voldemort, that Harry didn't cheer as loudly as his fellows at winning the Cup. He met Draco's look of stunned horror across the Great Hall and looked away, only to catch Snape glaring at him from the head table. He thought about what Dumbledore had said, that Snape had only been keeping him alive because he owed his father, and felt cold inside before shaking himself out of it. He had his friends, didn't he? And a whole summer ahead of him to finish memorizing *1001 Herbs and Fungi.*
Harry did a lot of cooking over the summer. With his textbooks locked away, cooking was really the only thing he could do that didn't start an argument. Aunt Petunia even graced him with something that vaguely resembled a smile, before warning him not to go trying to make anything foreign. Harry took a moment to think about absolutely nothing, and made four different cakes at slightly different temperatures. They all came out edible, and Dudley actually nodded at him in a vaguely nonthreatening manner. Harry had a slice of the best one, and went to the library to check out another book on muggle botany. It didn't include any plant uses or magical plants, but there were some useful things in there somewhere about growing conditions and folklore. It beat staring at the wall waiting for a letter to come from his friends.

When botany failed to hold his attention (which was almost all the time, outside of moments of sheer stubbornness), Harry attempted to daydream about Quidditch, which was faintly depressing, tried not to think about his dreams, and did drills where he imagined his potions professor turning up and reading his mind and having to think about something he wouldn't mind Professor Snape knowing about.

Thinking about Professor Snape's opinion of yet another argument with his uncle made Harry snort.

"Something funny about your infernal racket disrupting my sleep, boy?"

"Sorry, uncle. I had something in my throat."

At least someone would be happy if Professor Snape saw how Harry's life was with the Dursleys. Professor Snape could get together with Uncle Vernon to find new ways to call him an idiot.

For lack of anything better to try, Harry did his best to start thinking about pink elephants whenever it occurred to him that someone might be reading his mind. Pink elephants were hard to stop thinking about, he'd heard. Pink elephants dancing. Pink elephants playing the tuba. Pink elephants in pink tutus. Baby pink elephants, and mama pink elephants. Baby pink elephants locked in an owl cage-

Harry shook his head sharply.

Dancing pink elephants. A pink elephant playing a drum.

Hermione would probably have a better idea about how to deal with mind reading, but it hadn't occurred to him to talk to her about it before break and now, well. There just hadn't been the chance, what with the complete lack of letters.

If Draco had been there, he'd have recruited Dudley as his minion within the first week. Probably played some trick on him to get Dudley to get his books for him, and lived it up all summer. Harry tried to comfort himself with the thought that at the very least, he still wasn't Draco Malfoy. Even if Draco would have his potions homework done on time, and not get Professor Snape's Look 52, 'disapproval with a side of you should have been drowned at birth.'

Harry had had way too much time this summer to brood about Professor Snape's many and various ways of expressing hatred.

#

Harry really didn't like Dobby. Harry really loved Ronald Weasley.


A Flying Car Is Still A Good Idea

The Burrow was absolutely wonderful, and meeting Draco's eyes while his father got into a *fistfight* was something glorious - all Harry had to do was raise his eyebrows like Snape would have and Draco looked away. It was Harry's job, as his rival, to prick Draco's huge ego, right? Right.

At least that was the defense Harry was going with. It felt almost as good as getting Dudley back for all the many and various tortures of childhood had, this summer, though that really could have ended better.

He had a chance to finish his summer homework, and practice for Quidditch. Weeks of peace, and absolutely-no-quiet-at-all.

Then they missed the train. Then they flew the car into the Whomping Willow.

"*Hang on,* Harry muttered to Ron. "*There's an empty chair at the staff table... where's Snape?*"

Professor Severus Snape was the worst teacher in the school, and Harry was his least favorite student. He was also Harry’s favorite professor, which just made the whole thing worse somehow. He was cruel, sarcastic, horribly disliked, and absolutely brilliant.

"Maybe he’s ill!" said Ron hopefully.

"Maybe he’s left," Harry said, trying to figure out if he was feeling joy or despair, "Because he missed out on the Defense Against the Dark Arts job again."

"Or he might have been sacked!" Ron said enthusiastically, shooting Harry a half-apologetic look.

"Do you think-"

"Or maybe," said a very cold voice behind them, "He’s waiting to hear why you two didn’t arrive on the school train."

Harry spun around, wishing he and Ron had had Neville with them on this adventure. There was Snape, smiling at them, and Neville was the best in their group at remembering that speaking about Snape could *summon* him somehow.

In any other circumstance, being in Snape’s office would have been a dream come true. Harry pinched himself surreptitiously, just in case this was another nightmare.

Harry sat quiet and white-faced through Snape’s interrogation, and then through McGonagall’s demands for an explanation, and Dumbledore’s gentle but horrible chiding. And throughout, Snape was so *happy*, and then the happiness slid off him as if it had never been there.

At least his dorm mates still thought it was brilliant.

#

Harry went by the potions classroom after Defense, and after a minute eyeing the door as if it would eat him, decided that he might as well get it over with.

There was no one inside. The classroom was clean, quiet, and empty. Harry looked around, and thought, *Well, I do know where his office is now.*

He knocked on Snape’s office door and tried to convince himself he wasn’t going mad.
“Enter.”

Harry edged inside.

“What are you doing here, Potter.”

“I wondered if, um, you wanted any help with the cleanup this year, professor.”

“In a word? No.”

Harry eyed the floor, thinking about pink elephants.

“Was there anything else?”

“No, professor.”

“Then I’m sure you can find another tree to mangle if you try hard enough,” Snape said in something very close to a hiss.

#

Professor Snape held him back after Potions class, the second week in. Harry hadn’t gotten back his summer assignment with the rest of the class, and he had a sinking feeling about this.

“Professor?”

“I am confused. Nay, puzzled, by this embarrassment of an assignment,” Snape said, handing it back to him. T, for Troll. Oh, dear. “I expect you thought that the boy-who-lived did not need to apply himself to his work?”

“No, professor, it was—“

“Be silent.”

“But, professor—“

“If you cannot follow a simple instruction, you have no future in potions, nor in Hogwarts.”

Harry bit his tongue, and didn’t yell.

“So. You failed to complete your assignment to a reasonable standard. Do you offer any excuse?”

Did that mean he was allowed to talk?

“Well, I’ve got one, but you don’t want it,” Harry muttered not-quite-under-his-breath.

The silence in the classroom was absolutely frigid.

“No, professor,” Harry said, after a minute. “No excuse.”

“I expect this from Neville Longbottom. Indeed, I expect it from most of your classmates. They do not care, nor value, the subject I am attempting to cram into their tiny little minds.” Snape swept back to his desk, turned, lifted his chin – perhaps the most animation he’d ever seen on the man. “Very well. Your excuse, Potter.”

What?
“Um. Er. My uncle locked my books in a closet?”

“Which led to you completing the assignment at the end of the summer?”

“I went to stay with Ron.”

“For how long?”

“A couple weeks?”

“My summer assignments are not such that they take more than two weeks to complete, Mister Potter.”

“But I had other-“

Snape interrupted, “And you will continue to fail if you do not make your work a priority.”

There wasn’t much Harry could say to that.

“I hope you are thoroughly disgusted with yourself, Potter,” Snape said. “You may go.”

It was only later, when he was being interrogated by Hermione about what Professor Snape had wanted, and her comparing their assignments and the marks they’d received, that he found that Professor Snape was being unfair – that he’d done as well as Ron, and been graded far more sharply.

Hermione’s meltdown about how she should have done better, why wasn’t she getting the advanced criticism – well, it soothed something in his soul that he didn’t know was burning.
In Which We Learn the M Word

Draco joined the Quidditch team, Ron gave himself slugs, and Harry learned a slur.

“Apologize to Hermione,” Harry said the next day, in the same courtyard. He kept his voice down, on the theory that Draco was slightly less awful without an audience.

“I’m sorry, Potter, I can’t hear you when you make no sense.”

“Apologize to Hermione, or I won’t be your rival anymore.”

Draco looked Harry up and down, and snorted. His minions lurked in the background.

“As if you have a choice.”

“I do, because I can tell everyone you’re Hermione’s rival for top of the class. Competing with a muggleborn witch.” Harry didn’t add ‘and losing.’

Draco went an interesting puce color.

“She insulted me first, Potter.”

“So you’ll be being the gentleman or something. I don’t care why you do it. You can insult her all you like, just as long as you don’t call her a-“

Draco eyed him.

“Call her that,” Harry finished.

“You,” Draco said thoughtfully, “Will owe me a favor.”

“Because I wanted you to not be a-“ giant git, “Because I wanted you to act like a decent person?”

“To Hermione Granger? You will owe me a favor. Say it, Potter, or get out of my way.”

“Fine. I’ll owe you a favor.”

This was probably a terrible idea. But watching Hermione as she gleefully set Draco’s elegantly calligraphed apology note on fire was really wonderful, somehow.
Harry Would Be Safer as an Accountant

It took Harry weeks to get up the courage to confront Snape. Weeks of dealing with Lockhart, Quidditch, and Malfoy, in an exhausting spiral that left him little time to feel sorry for himself and less time to plot. Still, eventually he settled on a strategy in true Gryffindor fashion – charge straight ahead, smash everything. He waited until the weekend, so there wouldn’t be any embarrassing witnesses for what was sure to end badly.

“Professor.”

Professor Snape proceeded to ignore him.

“You said last year I should be treated like everyone else. I don’t think you would have tried to get everyone else expelled at the start of term.”

Professor Snape continued grading papers.

“I know you hate me. I know you hated my father. But I thought better of you, somehow.”

“I see the Headmaster already has you copying his pedantic moral soliloquies. I am not charmed, Mister Potter.”

“I don’t understand you at all,” Harry said, and turned to leave.

“Mister Potter,” Professor Snape said, when Harry was almost out of the room, hand on the door. Harry paused.

“It is not in your nature, but consider the previous year. How many times have you almost died since you came to Hogwarts? I thought perhaps it was Quirrell, but this year you managed to nearly murder yourself via tree, and the year is young. I truly do not expect you to live to graduate, so you might as well give up.”

Harry took a few minutes to disentangle this.

“You’re not the first person to tell me I’d be in danger if I came back to Hogwarts this year,” he ground out, “And I’ll tell you what I told him – I don’t need your help.”

Professor Snape said something as he slammed the door behind him, but Harry was already running, and he didn’t hear it. Forget Snape, forget Dobby, forget everything. His face was dry by the time he hit the Quidditch pitch. Harry was a wizard, and he had a broom, and he could fly, and in the rush of air and twist of wind, he could forget all the problems that waited for him on the ground.
Draco took a moment during potion brewing to come over and eye Harry’s potion, which was stubbornly bright pink instead of lavender.

“Oh, dear. Failing again, are we? You know, it’s too bad we’re not friends, Potter. I might take pity on you and tutor you.”

Harry glanced at Ron, who shrugged, because as of February last year Ron had a death vow to stay out of Harry’s potions Thing. Harry looked back at Draco.

“We’re not friends.”

“I’m hurt.”

Draco rehearsed that in a mirror, was what Draco was.

“You’re a bully,” Harry said flatly. “So we’re not friends.”

“I am not,” Draco said.

Harry gave him a flat look, and then glanced at Hermione and Neville, down the way.

“Fred and George Weasley are bullies, and you like them fine,” Draco drawled quietly. And then, more loudly, “And Neville doesn’t mind me suggesting ways for him to improve himself, do you, Neville?”

“Two points from Gryffindor for distracting your classmates, Potter,” Snape interrupted. Draco, taking the hint, went back to his own potion. Harry seethed quietly through class.

“Rotter,” Ron murmured to him. “It’s not like Fred and George hurt anyone.”

Harry nodded, but the barb stuck under his skin, just the way he knew Draco knew it would. He and Draco were getting to know each other far too well for Harry’s comfort.

Perhaps it was that edge of anger and anxiety that prompted him to approach Professor Snape after class.

“It won’t work,” Harry said abruptly, not looking up at his professor. “Trying to make me miserable so I’ll leave school, I mean. I won’t do it.”

“Mister Potter, the next time you attempt to divine my motives, I will have you scrubbing cauldrons for a week of your precious Quidditch practices.”

So, really, his long term goal to get his Potions professor to like him was going *wonderfully*.
Mandrakes and Mysteries

Draco Malfoy, whatever his reasons, did not yell slurs in the hallways of Hogwarts upon discovering Harry standing over an apparently dead cat, with blood smeared on the walls.

He did grin and go, "Couldn't happen to a nicer animal. Hip hip hurrah!"

Which is why he was leading a choir of cheers when Filch turned up. It really wasn't much better than him using the M word, from Harry's perspective. The only positive thing about the entire evening was Snape talking about something called a Mandrake Restorative Draft, which wasn't in any of their textbooks. Granted, when Harry tentatively asked about it all he got was a tired, "We have a library for a reason, Mister Potter," but that was very nearly encouraging.

The recipe for Mandrake Restorative Drafts was horribly complicated, but the longest stage seemed to be growing the actual mandrake, which Harry took as a tentative plus.

#

On the list of things he didn’t want Professor Snape to know about, a mysterious phantom voice telling him to rip, tear, and kill had jumped right to the top of the list, so he was a little distracted during the next Potions class trying to keep up a constant stream of thought about elephants.

Pink elephants, pink elephants, thinking about pink elephants-

“Mister Potter, what precisely are you doing?”

Pink elephants!

“Scrub that out and start over.”

Harry eyed his potion - his sludge, to be brutally frank - sighed, and went to the sink to obey.

Later, after class and scrubbing tubeworms off the desks (really), Professor Snape eyed him without favor.

“An explanation, Mister Potter.”

“…I was thinking about pink elephants.”

Professor Snape gave him look number 5, ‘children are the worst.’

“Because I thought if you could read minds, you’d hear the elephants and not what I was thinking about,” Harry explained hurriedly.

“Your guilty conscience is not my problem, Mister Potter, regrettable as your natural tendency towards lying may be. Your potions are.”

“Sorry, professor.”

Professor Snape gave him a very unreadable look.

“Repeat after me, Potter. Occulmency.”

“Occulmency, Professor?”
“Now, what do you do when you discover an unfamiliar term?”

“Ask Hermione, Professor?”

Professor Snape looked at him under lowered lids.

“Thankfully, your horrendous study habits are also not my problem. Go. You are giving me a headache.”

“I have a headache potion that might help—"

“Get out.”

Well, Harry thought that went well!

#

It turned out Occulmency was the study of defending the mind against mind reading, and that mind reading was more complicated than just being in the same room with someone you thought could probably read minds. *Principles of Mind Majicks* was an even more awful book than the introductory *Potions* text, but Hermione was interested enough in the project to read bits of it and summarize for Harry and Ron.

“You’re supposed to clear your mind and only then start constructing mental defenses,” she explained later. “And it’s supposed to help with dreams, sometimes, Harry!”

Harry pretended very hard not to have heard her, on the theory that his dreams would go away if he didn’t think about them.

#

“Our headache potion, Mister Potter.”

Harry eyed him.

“You are not the sort of boy who thinks things through. You have headaches frequent enough to need it. Therefor, you have it with you. Give it to me.”

Harry glared, but handed over the small glass jar of smoky blue potion. Professor Snape held it up to the light, eyeing it.

“The standard recipe?”

“Yes, professor.”

Professor Snape didn’t comment on this, opening the jar and taking a drop of the potion out with a finger. He touched it to his tongue, expression pensive.

“You are unlikely to poison yourself. No more than two doses a day, do not use stale frogspawn, and do not share. I will not have another amateur apothecary set up behind my back.”

“…does that happen a lot, professor?” Harry said, grabbing his jar back before Professor Snape could change his mind.

“Students are my punishments for my sins.”
“You must have an awful lot of sins, then,” Harry said, and froze as he saw Professor Snape’s expression.

Harry backed away slowly, because he was beginning to get a sense of when Professor Snape was about to tip over from dutiful teacher who hated him into adult wizard who hated him.

“Survive, mate?” Ron asked, waiting in the hall.

“Yeah, I think so.”

“What’s he keep wanting to talk to you about, anyway?”

Harry showed him the headache potion.

“Potions. I think if he weren’t allergic to teaching, he would have said I’d done a pretty good job?”

Ron clapped him on the shoulder.

“You need higher standards, mate.”
The argument about whether Draco Malfoy was the Heir of Slytherin reminded Harry eerily of their argument about Snape the previous year, and it was hard to put his objection into words when Ron was going on about dark wizards, and Harry had to admit Lucius Malfoy was really suspicious. It wasn't as if Draco was a good person or anything.

And Hermione had said, ever so innocently, "There are lots of powerful potions in Moste Potente Potions, I'm sure we could copy down a few of them before returning the book to the library," and Harry was stuck.

Even if it wasn't Malfoy, logically speaking it had to be a Slytherin, right? Heir of Slytherin, after all. It could be Crabbe. Harry had a bad feeling about Crabbe, and torturing cats was just his style, though Harry wasn't sure being smart enough to torture cats was.

Harry paced Moaning Myrtle's bathroom anxiously, checking on the door and windows. There should be enough air moving here to prevent a repeat of the Snape Smelling His Hair incident (thank god Draco'd never heard about that). If it were less creepy and out of order, it would actually be quite nice, as bathrooms went. Girls really did get nice things. There was even a snake etched into one of the taps. Snakes, Harry thought happily, were good luck.

Having Hermione arguing him into breaking the rules was really a disconcerting experience, he thought a little bit later. Something about stealing from Snape's store cupboard stomped all over his bad idea alarm, but... well. It was Hermione.

Beating Malfoy at Quidditch was the only thing that went well that week, if you could call getting his arm broken going well.

The theft was easy, even if the night before Harry couldn't manage to sleep. A firework aimed at Crabbe's cauldron of Swelling Solution provided the diversion, Hermione accomplished her task, and Harry tried to ignore the look in Snape's eyes and the tone of his voice.

"If I ever find out who threw this," Snape whispered, "I shall make sure that person is expelled."

#

The first clue was Neville's frantic hand gestures the next morning over breakfast, the universal signal for 'Snape, right behind you!'

Harry and Ron froze, and across from them Hermione smiled bright and fragile.

"Good morning, professor," she chirped.

"Potter. I require a moment of your time after your classes today."

"...what's this about, professor?" Harry asked, twisting to look at him.

Ignoring the question entirely, Snape swept away towards the staff table.

"He doesn't make any sound when he moves," Ron hissed. "He must be part vampire."

"I don't think you can have part vampires," Hermione said doubtfully. "It's not in any of the books."

"He can't get you on anything," Ron said brightly. "So don't worry about it."
Harry thought about professors that could read minds, stolen boomslang skin, the look in Malfoy's eyes as he got swelling solution all over himself, and thought it probably wouldn't be that simple.

"He probably just wants to yell at someone," Harry said brightly. "Or have me scrub slugs again."

"You really should talk to Professor McGonnegall about him, Harry," Hermione added. "He's not being fair to you."

"And have Professor Snape tell her Harry's been opening the Chamber of Secrets and letting off fireworks and things?" Ron challenged. "I don't see that ending well, do you?"

The argument proceeded apace in a friendly way, and Harry let himself relax for a while.

#

Snape was standing at the front of the Potions classroom, holding a giant blue book. He pointed to a stool. Harry sat, avoiding meeting his eyes, mind empty as if waiting for a snitch to dart into his field of vision.

“Sit. Read."

The book Snape handed to him was a huge, ancient thing bound in dragonhide, almost bigger than Harry himself. He propped it on the counter and peered at the parchment, deciphering the old-fashioned handwriting.

> And upon such time as the Thief was Found, it was found that he had been a Master, and all were Aghast that such a thing could be done by one of their Own. So it was agreed that None should buy from him and None should sell to him. He was No One, and his mastery nothing. For truly, is it not the Blackest of sins to take the work of another, prepared by their hands and for their purposes? Are we not a Brotherhood?

At which point Harry stopped reading and simply stared at the text, feeling numb and awful and like the lowest pond scum. It’s not as if he made a habit of stealing, when he didn't have a good reason. Food, sometimes, but that was different, he didn’t think even Professor Snape would argue with that-

He glanced up at Professor Snape and revised that to, Professor Snape would probably argue with that-

"Are you trying to get yourself expelled, Potter?" his professor asked softly. "There are easier ways."

"No, sir."

"I am waiting for an excuse, then. I expect it to be exceptional."

Harry thought about excuses, and reasons, and Hermione. He thought about his dreams of the future, which if they involved him living to be a grownup, often involved Professor Snape at some point apologizing to him for being a git and admitting that he was really great at Potions, and could they... do something vague and undefined together. Create a new potion, maybe. Without Snape yelling at him for being an idiot, preferably, but Harry's dreams weren't quite that detached from reality.

"I didn't do anything," Harry said heavily. "But if I had, it'd only be if it was important."

"Important. Twelve year olds do not do important things, Mister Potter. That is what adults are for."
Harry couldn't think of a thing to say to that.

"You are aware that in case of important things - emergencies - the correct response is to go to an adult?"

Harry turned this over in his head. Snape was still speaking in that scary, soft voice, near a whisper.

"Professor McGonnegall didn't believe me last year, about Voldemort," Harry said, staring at the book in his lap.

"Then choose a different adult, Potter," Snape snapped.

Harry jerked his head up and met his professor's eyes in blatant shock.

“Professor Snape,” Harry said, very, very slowly, “Are you asking me to trust you?”

They looked at each other for a long moment.

“Never speak of this again,” Snape said.

“Right,” Harry nodded sharply, and hopped down off the stool. It wouldn’t be right or kind to talk about a professor’s lapse into temporary insanity.
An Overdue Conversation With Neville

The first week of brewing Polyjuice was one of the happiest in Harry’s life. He read about advanced venoms and creepy concoctions in *Moste Potente Potions*, and decided to skip learning the Laxative Potion entirely. He couldn’t actually imagine making most of the potions from the book, but the way they were put together was interesting, even if it involved sitting on an out of order toilet and peering at tiny spidery handwriting.

There was a bit of an awkward conversation with Hermione, though, when the time came to prepare the ingredients for the potion.

“Er, Harry, I know you really enjoy making potions, but… we only have enough for one try, and….”

“And?”

“Sometimes you get a little… distracted. When you work on your potions. It’s understandable! But – is it alright if I make this one? You can make the next one!”

And she looked so nervous and frazzled that all Harry could do was hug her and assure her that it was fine, he didn’t mind, he’d be happy to watch. It was really complicated, after all. (And he didn’t even want to think about Snape’s reaction if more potions ingredients went missing from the cupboard. Never again.)

Admittedly, being thought the Heir of Slytherin and showing off that he was a Parselmouth to the whole school during dueling club could have gone better, and he didn’t know what that look Snape had given him had been about. And then there was the conversation with Neville. They were in their dormitory, and had a rare moment of privacy. Neville gave him nervous look, and said, “You’ve been breaking rules again.”

“Um.”

“With Ron and Hermione.”

“…sorry, Neville. I just….”

“I’m not going to tell.”

“You’re not?”

“You did have a good reason last time.”

“I have a good reason this time, too,” Harry assured him quickly. “Ah – do you want to know-?”

“No, I don’t think so. Professor Snape hates me enough already, and I’d break my grandmother’s heart if I got expelled. I’d manage it, you know I would.”

Harry considered the ways Neville managed to mess up basic spellwork and winced. It wasn’t that Neville was bad at studying, as far as he could tell. Spells just went wrong somehow, around him. Especially when he was nervous.

“Sorry, Neville.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Neville said, with a small smile. “Just – it’s not Voldemort again, is it?”
Harry flinched.

“I….” Was it Voldemort again? Harry’s blood chilled just thinking about it. “It’s the Heir of Slytherin. Whoever that is.”

Neville nodded, looking gloomy.

“Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help?”

“I will. Thanks, Neville. And… sorry about last year.”

He couldn’t help thinking about Draco’s comment about bullies, when Fred and George decided to have a good time by laughing about him being the Heir of Slytherin all over school. It was sort of funny, but at the same time, it really just… wasn’t. It made him feel better, but the rest of the school kept flinching. It made him feel unpleasantly like Draco Malfoy, and that made him feel like, somehow, this was all Draco Malfoy’s fault. Which made him feel a little better about Hermione’s plan for spying.
"Saint Potter, the Mudbloods’ friend," said Malfoy slowly. "He’s another one with no proper wizard feeling, or he wouldn’t go around with that jumped up Granger Mudblood. And people think he’s Slytherin’s heir. Except we shouldn’t use those words, should we, boys?" He laughed softly, and Harry held his breath in an attempt to avoid shouting. He’d thought, somehow, that Draco was better than this, not just hiding it.

“Right, Draco," Ron mumbled, saving Harry from having to say anything.

"I wish I knew who it is," said Malfoy petulantly. "It’s hard to plan anything without proper information."

Ron’s jaw dropped so that Crabbe looked even more clueless than usual. Fortunately, Malfoy didn’t notice, and Harry, thinking fast, said, "You must have some idea who's behind it all…."

"You know I haven't, Goyle, how many times do I have to tell you?" snapped Malfoy. "And Father won't tell me anything about the last time the Chamber was opened either. Of course, it was fifty years ago, so it was before his time, but he knows all about it, and he says that it was all kept quiet and it'll look suspicious if I know too much about it. But I know one thing - last time the Chamber of Secrets was opened, a Mudblood died. So I bet it's a matter of time before one of them's killed this time …. I hope it's Granger," he said with relish.

Ron was in no shape to ask another question, and Harry wasn’t doing much better, nearly blind with fury.

“Why her?”

“Because she’s Potter’s precious pet, of course.”" Draco gave them a cool, arrogant look. “No repeating that, mind. Father wants us to leave the Heir to his business, but Potter’s still worth cultivating.”

Harry was trying to resist the urge to cultivate his fist into Draco’s face, and Ron wasn’t doing much better – he was turning redder and redder, and Draco was looking between them curiously. Even Ron’s hair was turning red.

"Medicine for my stomach," Ron grunted, and without further ado they sprinted the length of the Slytherin common room, hurled themselves at the stone wall, and dashed up the passage, hoping against hope that Malfoy hadn’t noticed anything.

Malfoy noticed something.

#

“Potter,” Draco Malfoy said stiffly, that Saturday, gesturing Harry to proceed him into a semi-private part of what Harry was beginning to think of as their argument courtyard. It was raining, so Harry leaned against one of the pillars.

“Malfoy.” Harry glared at him.

“I assume that was you with Weasley, the other day.”

Harry shrugged, because talking to Malfoy really wasn’t high on his list of things to do today.
“I’m not apologizing again,” Malfoy said abruptly. “You break into our common room, you take what you get.”

Harry knotted his hands together and tried to find something calm inside him. It didn’t really work. Malfoy was just so awful, and he didn’t have to be awful, and it was just –

“Why do you hate Hermione so much?” he burst out with. “Just because I’m friends with her?”

“Don’t be absurd, Potter. I hate each of you and Granger and Weasley individually, for your own special reasons. I hate Granger because she’s entirely obnoxious.”

“That’s no reason to hope she gets murdered,” Harry hissed. “I should hex you.”

“Try it,” Draco said. “I’ve got Crabbe and Goyle in shouting distance, and I bet I can get you kicked off the Quidditch team. Poor, dear Draco, victim of the Heir of Slytherin.”

“You know I’m not.”

“Obviously.”

“So why pretend?”

“Because I’m trying to help him,” Draco said, as if speaking to a very stupid small animal. “Because I agree with him.”

Harry tried to clear his mind, and failed miserably.

“Why aren’t Crabbe and Goyle right over your shoulders, anyway?”

“Why’re Weasley and Granger not over yours?”

“I had Quidditch practice,” Harry muttered. “That’s different.”

“It really isn’t. And to answer your question, Crabbe and Goyle aren’t here because I plan to talk about them, and it’s easier to talk about people behind their back.”

“I don’t want to talk to you, Malfoy. I don’t want to look at you. I want you to never talk to or look at Hermione, ever again.”

“Or you’ll do what?”

“Or I’ll leave you to her,” Harry snapped. “She likes to set things that annoy her on fire, you know.”

Draco looked uneasy. Good, Harry thought vengefully.

“What will you give me, if I leave Granger alone?” Draco asked abruptly.

“I don’t work like that, Malfoy. I don’t – I don’t play games with people like that.”

“I want you not to drug my minions again,” Draco said, continuing as if Harry hadn’t said anything at all. “It’s embarrassing. That’s fair, isn’t it? I’ll leave yours alone if you leave mine alone.”

“…you’re not the Heir, so I don’t need to do anything with them.”

Draco grinned crookedly. “You thought I was the Heir of Slytherin? I’m flattered.”

“You. Argh.”
“I could get you in a lot of trouble for trespassing, you know. You don’t have to look like I stepped on your cat.”

“You want to murder my friend.”

“Not personally. I just wouldn’t care if she died, and it would be—” Draco shrugged. “Convenient. I’m not going to help the Heir, Harry. I’d much rather stay out of this little death match you have going and congratulate the winner.”

“That’s not what you told Crabbe and Goyle.”

Draco smiled like a lizard.

“I lied.”

Harry was pretty sure there was a logic puzzle like this, but his patience had run out. He turned and stalked away, and Draco didn’t stop him. He was so, so glad he and Draco weren’t friends.
Harry Isn't That Deep

Chapter Summary

In which Harry is a little too busy to worry about studying, but we forgive him because he does save the day from another evil ghost and a basilisk.

The rest of Christmas break was mostly spent in trying to cheer Hermione up about being turned half-cat. Potions class, when it resumed, chilled to record levels thanks to the new vigour in Harry and Draco’s feud. Draco took absolute delight in pointing out every toe Harry put out of line and every mistake he made, as well as seeing how often he could toss inappropriate ingredients into Harry’s potions. Harry truly regretting having an interest for Draco to poke holes in. It gave far too wide a margin for creativity.

Hexing his diary out of Malfoy’s hands did feel pretty good, though, even if he didn’t like the ugly look in Draco’s eyes afterwards.

#

Time rolled onwards. Harry met Tom Riddle, confronted Hagrid, and Dumbledore left the school. Students weren’t allowed to go anywhere alone, curtailing any efforts Harry might have made at independent study. With Hermione petrified, it all felt like too much work anyway.

#

One person, however, seemed to be thoroughly enjoying the atmosphere of terror and suspicion. Draco Malfoy was strutting around the school as though he had just been appointed Head Boy. Harry didn’t realize what he was so pleased about until the Potions lesson about two weeks after Dumbledore and Hagrid had left, when, sitting right behind Malfoy, Harry overheard him gloating to Crabbe and Goyle.

"I always thought Father might be the one who got rid of Dumbledore,” he said, not troubling to keep his voice down. "I told you he thinks Dumbledore's the worst headmaster the school's ever had. Maybe we'll get a decent headmaster now. Someone who won't want the Chamber of Secrets closed. McGonagall won't last long, she's only filling in...."

Snape swept past Harry, making no comment about Hermione's empty seat and cauldron.

"Sir,” said Malfoy loudly. "Sir, why don't you apply for the headmaster's job?"

"Now, now, Malfoy," said Snape, though he couldn't suppress a thin-lipped smile. "Professor Dumbledore has only been suspended by the governors. I daresay he'll be back with us soon enough."

"Yeah, right," said Malfoy, smirking. "I expect you'd have Father's vote, sir, if you wanted to apply for the job - I'll tell Father you're the best teacher here, sir -"

Snape smirked as he swept off around the dungeon, fortunately not spotting Seamus Finnigan, who was pretending to vomit into his cauldron.
"It truly puzzles me that the muggleborn haven't all packed their bags by now," Malfoy went on. "I bet-"

"Would you shut up, Malfoy?" Harry interrupted.

"Sure, Potter. I'll spare your delicate sensibilities. How is Granger these days, anyway?"

"She is going to be fine. Thanks for asking."

The bell rang at that moment, which was lucky; it interrupted what would very definitely have been just as offensive as everything else Malfoy had been saying.

"Hurry up, I've got to take you all to Herbology," barked Snape over the class's heads, and off they marched. Snape had been pretty thoroughly ignoring Harry for months outside what Harry was beginning to think of as normal levels of criticism, but Harry couldn’t help but noticing that the man took more than his fair share of turns escorting Harry between classes. If Lockhart had been the one trying to keep him alive, he’d have had a lot better luck sneaking off to the Forbidden Forest, he thought resentfully.

#

"This is getting ridiculous, Potter," Draco informed him a few days later, interrupting what had been almost a good morning. Granted, it hadn’t had a chance to get started yet, because it was before breakfast. Harry looked longingly at the table just a little bit further into the great hall.

"What is?"

"You. You can’t set me on fire with your eyes, so you might as well stop trying."

"I always act like this, Malfoy."

"No, you’re cross about Granger. I didn’t do anything to Granger."

"Shut it."

Draco folded his arms.

"You owe me a favor."

"I’m a little busy right now, Malfoy."

"My favor is you stop acting like I’m personally responsible for everything."

"Your father-"

"Our conversations never do go well when we talk about each other’s fathers, do they?"

Harry had to admit this was entirely true, and subsided.

"So. That favor," Draco prompted.

"I’ll stop being upset with you when you stop being so happy all the time."

"I am not publically disagreeing with my father for you, Potter. Not in a million years."

"Then I’m not publically getting along with you, Malfoy."
“Oh, well. That’s alright then. Cheers.”

And with a cheery smile, Malfoy went to the Slytherin table. Harry had a sneaking suspicion that Malfoy thought Harry had just agreed to something.

#

Harry had a pretty good idea of what Professor Snape would think about him confronting the Heir of Slytherin and a giant basilisk, so he didn't ask him for his opinion beforehand.

He had one frantic moment in the middle of confronting Riddle to think, *Neville has good instincts about when something’s a plot by Lord Voldemort*, but then he didn't have any more time for idle thoughts, caught up in survival.
It was really too nice a day for Harry to be inside, but he had one last errand to run before term ended. Hopefully, this wasn't a terrible idea. He finally tracked the potions professor down doing a sweeping patrol of the green outside the school.

“Professor?”

“Yes, Mister Potter?”

“Um. Can I threaten my relatives with you?”

Professor Snape just looked at him.

“Only, it would really help with being able to do the Potions homework, and they know I can’t do magic at home now.”

“Homework is insufficient reason to threaten Muggles, Potter,” Snape said, sounding tired. “These relatives would be Petunia Evans and her husband?”

“And my cousin Dudley.”

“You may threaten the Muggles in my name if you are in mortal peril, and not before. ‘Severus Snape has a vested interest in my survival,’ or something like that.”

Harry grinned.

“I’m not sure I’ll phrase it like that, but, thanks, professor. You know Aunt Petunia?”

“No, I do not.” Snape hesitated. “We met, briefly. Many years ago.”

“So she’ll know who I’m talking about. Great!”

“Why me, if I may ask?”

“Well, you’re my scariest professor.”

“And yet you never listen to a word I say. Obviously I am not trying hard enough.”

“No, no no no, you’re terrifying! Really intimidating, everyone says so. You really don’t need to try any harder.”

Snape smiled a small, crooked smile.

“Have a good summer!” Harry said, and beat a hasty retreat.
Two books down! Hold onto your hats, folks, we're about to hit the point where we start diverging from canon in major ways, not just minor ways. I'm not entirely sure where we're going, but I'm thrilled to be sharing this ride with you. Comments so far greatly appreciated.
III: Willy Wonka Will Not Appear

Chapter Notes

(Italic sections copied from canon.)

Running away from home was definitely the best decision Harry had ever made. Two weeks of exploring, reading, trying to convince himself not to buy a Firebolt and, let's not forget, getting lost in the Apothecary for four hours. He tried imagining what Hermione and Ron would say, and settled on imaginary Ron saying, 'Cor, it's just like Hermione in a bookshop.' It made him smile. He bought regular Potions supplies, as well as extras of things he’d needed last year and didn’t have, like sugar for magical candy recipes and extra beetles for red coloring. After agonizing over a self-stirring cauldron and then visualizing Snape’s probable commentary on people who needed the help of self-stirring cauldrons to make third-year recipes, Harry gave up on deciding what to buy and picked up a catalog for owl order.

With last year's example in mind, Harry redid his painstakingly drafted essay on Shrinking Potions twice before giving up on figuring out how to improve it any further. He didn't bother with Oculmency practice - it wasn't as if attempting to clear his mind and fill it up with Quidditch tips had helped with Aunt Marge, and he had to assume your average dark wizard would be more trouble than his Aunt Marge - at least, he assumed so. His mind was, as a disdainful footnote in the textbook had put it, ‘chaotic, full of fire and principle, antithetical to proper restraint.’

Thankfully, a conversation he struck up with Florean Fortescue put paid to any tendency to sulk, because nothing could ruin the happiness he felt when he got to come behind the counter to see how one of the less proprietary ice creams was made, in a fantastic combination of cooking, potion-making, and clever application of the cooling charm. Harry practiced his cooling charm on a glass of lemonade, and the ice didn’t melt all afternoon.

“It may not be changing the world or handling dragons,” Mr. Fortescue confided in him, “But seeing a sad child smile when I hand him a sundae with a dancing cherry on top makes me think I’m making the world a little bit brighter in my own way.”

It provided a pleasant diversion from thinking about Sirius Black and whether or not he was going to die or trying to talk himself out of brooding over not having bought a Firebolt, right up until Ron started talking about Honeyduke’s on the train, and Harry realized his new interest in wizard’s candymaking was just another way his relatives were managing to make his life more difficult than it already had to be.

Perhaps it was with all this in mind that upon having a horrific encounter with a Dementor and being fed chocolate, his first question for Remus Lupin when he returned from making sure the Dementors had left the train was, “Do you know the recipe for this?”

Remus Lupin’s humble apology that he wasn’t sure, really, didn’t ruin Harry’s determination to figure it out. He’d always liked puzzles and candy, and puzzles made of candy seemed like a slightly more adult interest. He was a whole thirteen years old, after all. It provided a good distraction from Draco’s expert teasing, which Harry hadn’t grown fonder of by being away from him for a whole summer.
Professor Lupin looked particularly shabby next to all the other teachers in their best robes.

"Look at Snape!" Ron hissed in Harry's ear.

Professor Snape, the Potions master, was staring along the staff table at Professor Lupin. It was common knowledge that Snape wanted the Defense Against the Dark Arts job, but even Harry was startled at the expression twisting his thin, sallow face. It was beyond anger: it was loathing. Harry knew that expression only too well; it was the look Snape had worn for most of Harry's first year, and only looking at Snape now made Harry realize that he hadn't seen it since sometime near the beginning of his second year at school. These days Professor Snape varied between angry, tired, and blank around Harry. When had that changed? It was going to bother Harry, he knew it was, even if he didn't have time for another worry.
The first potion’s class of term included Draco “Lizard” Malfoy earning his nickname by getting Ron and Harry to cut up his daisy roots, peel his shrivelfig, and topping it off with the whispered observation, “Watch my timing, Potter. You might learn something.”

Harry wished Buckbeak had shredded both his arms.

“Try to wrap up this year’s mass murderer out to kill you before the end of term, would you, Potter?” Draco continued in an undertone, as Harry watched him add his caterpillars on a four-count and tried to help Ron salvage his daisy roots.

Hermione, in the background, was whispering frantically to Neville to clear his mind and pretend he was in the greenhouse revising. It seemed to be working – Neville added his caterpillars with a mix of clockwise and counterclockwise stirs and then fumbled in his potions kit purposefully. His orange (supposed to be green) potion turned an awful grey color that at least didn’t look quite so lurid.

"Hey, Harry," said Seamus Finnigan, leaning over to borrow Harry's brass scales, "have you heard? Daily Prophet this morning -- they reckon Sirius Black's been sighted."

"Where?" said Harry and Ron quickly. On the other side of the table, Malfoy looked up, listening closely.

"Not too far from here," said Seamus, who looked excited. "It was a Muggle who saw him. 'Course, she didn't really understand. The Muggles think he's just an ordinary criminal, don't they? So she phoned the telephone hot line. By the time the Ministry of Magic got there, he was gone."

"Not too far from here ..." Ron repeated, looking significantly at Harry. He turned around and saw Malfoy watching closely. "What, Malfoy? Need something else skinned?"

But Malfoy’s eyes were fixed Harry. He leaned across the table.

“I’m surprised you’re not more enthusiastic, Potter. If it was me, I’d be out there hunting him down already.”

"What are you talking about, Malfoy?” said Ron roughly.

"Don't you know, Potter?” breathed Malfoy, his pale eyes narrowed.

"Know what?"

“You don’t,” Malfoy said, looking like Christmas had come early. “Let me be there when someone tells you, I want to see your face,” he breathed.

"What are you talking about?” said Harry angrily, but at that moment Snape called, "You should have finished adding your ingredients by now; this potion needs to stew before it can be drunk, so clear away while it simmers and then we'll test Longbottom's..."

Neville’s grey potion, which made Hermione look like she might cry, was dutifully tested on his toad Trevor.

Everyone waited. Snape eyed it narrowly, seeming displeased.
“Is Trevor poisoned?” Neville asked in a tiny voice.

“You, boy, have managed to produce a potion with absolutely no effects. What did you do?”

“I added, um, powdered clover leaves and shredded horseradish. To counteract….”

Snape stared at Neville for a very long moment, the entire class holding its breath. Snape’s nostrils flared.

“A point to Gryffindor for having learned how to not kill anyone by accident,” Snape said. He smiled thinly. “You have just made the mistake of raising my expectations, Longbottom.” Neville went even paler, and Harry moved to surreptitiously keep him from falling out of his chair in a dead faint. “Class dismissed. Potter, stay.”

Malfoy jeered something about servants, which Harry tuned out with long practice. Malfoy was far too happy today.

It would have been nice if it had been a pretense for a chat, but it was mostly a pretense to make Harry deal with spatters of leech juice and putting leftover cat spleens back in their jars, which was precisely as nice as it sounded.

“Am I likely to be impressed by your summer essay?”

“Are you ever?”

“I will take points for cheek, Potter.”

“I don’t know,” Harry said, trying not to breathe. “It’s not two feet longer than you want and it’s not wrong, but I think I’m missing something.”

“No problems with your relations, then?”

“We didn’t get around to killing each other, if that’s what you mean.”

“Charmingly put. Any other near-death experiences to report so far this term?”

Harry paused, trying to figure out if the Dementors on the train counted, and was startled to find that his professor could make a noise like an angry teakettle.

“Has anyone checked you for curses that attract ill luck, Potter?” Snape asked abruptly. “For I cannot think of another explanation, I am simply agog.”

Harry touched his scarred forehead and eyed his professor through his fringe. Snape seemed to let out a very long breath.

“Yes, perhaps that would qualify. Very well.”

“Um. Professor Snape, you’ve already probably saved my life a bunch of times in first year. You really don’t have to keep helping. Really.”

Please don’t.

“Whatever dramatic history you have ascribed to me, you seem to forget that I am a teacher at this school and so have a responsibility to protect its students.”

Darn it, Harry couldn’t actually argue with that one.
“Counter-clockwise to clear, Potter,” his professor snapped, and Harry, startled, switched the direct of his scrubbing. It helped.

“I don’t see why,” Harry commented, happy to change the subject.

“Because potions are a form of ritual magic, and all ritual magic has common elements.”

“Should I look up ritual magic, then?”

“No more than an amateur muggle cook should look up biochemistry. You would do well to learn to follow simple instructions and maintain a basic awareness of your surroundings, without spending the entire class period gossiping.”

That was drastically unfair. Harry scrubbed vengefully, and ran out of table to scrub.

“Go. I have formed a clear impression of what this year is going to be like, and you will be late for lunch.”

Harry didn’t see why it mattered if he was a little late for lunch, but he was hungry. And since when did Professor Snape know anything about Muggles, anyway?
Snape Isn't Good At Caring About People

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At breakfast on Saturday the first weekend of term, Harry received a note.

Mister Potter,

Your essay is unacceptable. Visit my office at 10 this morning to discuss it.

Snape

Hermione, when Harry offered it to her, moaned.

“Professor Snape’s tutoring you again.”

“He’s going to tear it into little tiny pieces and soak them in acid. And laugh,” Harry pointed out.

“Educationally,” Hermione wailed.

“Are you alright, ‘Mione?” Ron asked. “You’ve been a little….”

“Private critique,” she said, and tried to drown herself in her teacup.

“Don’t worry,” Harry hastened to say. “He’s probably just going to, I don’t know… . Do you think it could be him deciding I’m worth tutoring.”

Ron patted him on the back.

“He still hates you.”

“Right,” Harry wilted, eyeing the note balefully. Ron wasn’t wrong, after all. Not as far as Harry knew.

“You don’t think he’s mad about the dress, do you?” Neville asked.

Harry thought Professor Snape would be mad about the dress for approximately the next decade, but it didn’t seem like a good idea to say so.

#

Professor Snape’s office was a little more cheery, with the fire lit. Not very cheery, but a little. Professor Snape was sitting at his desk, two glasses and two bottles on the desk next to him. Professor Snape looked up at him, and held out a roll of parchment. Harry took it, and unrolled it. It was his essay, drenched in green ink, tiny corrections filling up every spare inch. Harry’s eye twitched.

“You will read that after we finish here, so that you may be able to tell your classmates it is what we discussed. I will have your word this goes no further than you, no matter how you may trust your little friends.”

“…sir?”
“Your word, Mister Potter, if it has any worth.”

Harry jerked his chin up.

“I promise not to talk to anyone about this, unless it’s going to get someone hurt.”

“Only you, Mister Potter,” Snape said tiredly. “Only you.”

Harry thought that sounded pretty fair, all things considered.

“Sit.”

He sat.

“How much do you know about Sirius Black?”

“Well, he’s a murderer. A follower of, um, Voldemort,” Snape’s eyes narrowed at the name. “He killed a lot of people, and now he wants to kill me. And there’s something people aren’t telling me.”

“Correct. They are not telling you, because they think you are the sort of boy who runs off to steal Philosopher’s Stones, confront trolls, and fight basilisks.”

“Why’s everyone so worried about me fighting Sirius Black? I mean, even Draco said so – not that he was worried, he thought it was a great laugh, but—” Harry hesitated.

“My experience with you is that you will keep digging until you find out whatever adults are hiding from you for your own good, breaking every school rule you can think of and getting yourself half-killed at the best of times. Fool me once, fool me twice, fool me three times… I am not a fool, Mister Potter.”

“I’m not doing it for the glory,” Harry managed to mutter. “I know you think so, but I’m not. It’s just someone had to, or Voldemort would have had the Stone, and Ginny’d be dead now.”

“And in another far more likely future, you would have died twice over, along with your friends.”

“Well, I didn’t.”

“Spare me your adolescent fit, if you want me to explain.”

Harry twitched, straightened his shoulders from their unconscious hunch, and tried to look attentive and perky. Snape looked vaguely disturbed.

“We are going to talk about two things, in order,” Snape said. “Why you should not attempt to confront Black, and why you should.”

“That… doesn’t make any sense.” At Snape’s dark look, Harry shut his mouth.

Snape poured careful measures of an amber liquid into one glass, and a pale pearl potion into the other. Harry recognized calming draught. Snape slid it across the table to him.

“Drink that when you need to,” Snape ordered.

“Professor Snape, does the headmaster know you’re telling me this?”

“I’m sure he’ll figure it out, in due time.”
Harry was feeling very good about this plan, until a snake-quick motion and a barked word made the world fade around him, in a flash of red.

Harry woke up on the floor, and scrambled to his feet, searching for his wand. He met Snape’s eyes. The man was standing, and had his own wand pointed at Harry and Harry’s wand held casually in his off hand. His eyes were empty.

“The reason you should not face an adult wizard in battle is that you will die. Just as I could have killed you just then.”

“I wasn’t expecting—“

“And Sirius Black will not strike you face to face.”

Harry jerked out of the way as another spell went sizzling by him, and ducked behind the desk in a skidding dive. The office was large, but not endless, and he avoided two, three, four spells by sheer acrobatics, wishing for a broom. Glass shattered behind him, and Harry dodged sideways. He smelled his own hair burning, and tackled his teacher into a wall.

Harry went still, feeling a wandpoint at his throat.

“This is what facing an adult wizard is like, Potter. You did well at first, better than I expected, but your instincts were wrong. Instead of running away, you came at me. If I had wanted you dead, the next step would be the killing curse. Do you understand me?”

“Dumbledore—”

“Headmaster Dumbledore does not understand to the depth of his bones your sheer penchant for throwing yourself headlong in front of hydras. Or perhaps he finds it charming. If you attempt to confront Sirius Black alone, you will die. If you attempt to confront Sirius Black with your little friends, they will die. If you see him, run. To the headmaster, preferably.”

“Not to you? Sir?”

“Much as I would like to extinguish Sirius Black myself, between the Headmaster and I, he is the better duelist.”

Snape’s tone had never once left dead level throughout the entire conversation. It was incredibly creepy.

“I’ve fought Voldemort—“

“You’ve fought Quirrell and a shade, and you are lucky to be alive. Quirrell was an average duelist at best. Sirius Black is deadly, unhinged, obsessive, cruel, and from an old Dark family that teaches their children curses from the cradle. Listen, for once in your misbegotten life.”

“Fine,” Harry gritted. “Once you finish explaining. This was an explanation, wasn’t it?”

There was battle-light glittering in Professor Snape’s eyes, but they settled back in their chairs as if nothing had happened, as if it had been a duel and everything was fine. Harry himself was tense as a bowstring, and snatched his wand up from where Snape set it down on the table. He didn’t put it
Snape held his glass of amber liquid up to the light. It glinted gold.

“Firewhiskey,” he commented, as if they’d just been talking about the weather, and then drank it, setting the glass back down on the desk with a click. He steepled his fingers. “Do you need the calming draught, Potter?”

Harry shook his head.

“Sirius Black betrayed your parents to their deaths. They thought he was their friend, and he told Voldemort where they were hiding.”

Harry’s breath hitched. Time went a little funny. His ears were ringing – green light, a woman begging, horrible laughter.

Professor Snape poured himself another precise measure of firewhiskey, and drank it. He eyed Harry, eyes glittering.

“Drink, Potter.”

Harry drank the calming draught, and sagged back in his chair.

“He was their friend?”

“Since they were in school together,” Snape confirmed distantly.

“Dumbledore said you knew them.”

“He was there.”

“Well,” Harry said, feeling eerily calm. “I do want to find him and kill him now.”

“You must not,” Snape said. “You are not walking out that door without your word you will do nothing foolish.”

Harry really didn’t think Snape had anything he could bribe Harry with, not one thing, that would stop him from wanting to find Sirius Black and do something about him taking Harry’s parents away.

Well, there was one thing.

“…you could bribe me,” Harry offered, thinking aloud.

Snape’s expression was priceless. Harry made a mental note to revisit it when he was capable of having emotions.

“I want to be let back into the Potions classroom after classes. And to learn to make Polyjuice properly.”

“Are you admitting to making Polyjuice with my potions stores, Potter?”

“No. I would never admit to that,” Harry said, smiling at his professor. Snape didn’t smile back. Silly of him.

There was a long silence. Harry rather thought Professor Snape should have filled it with drinking,
but he wasn’t in charge of Professor Snape’s choices.

“When your friends are busy, you may study in the Potions classroom as long as I am there. Do not expect me to coddle you. Go nowhere alone. Promise me you will not seek out Sirius Black.”

“I promise.”

He ended up reading his Shrinking Solution notes while he waited for the potion to wear off enough for him to feel comfortable walking in a straight line. Harry was really not sure convincing Professor Snape to be his tutor had been the best plan, but at least Professor Snape wasn’t throwing hexes at him anymore, which had to count for something.

After a start to the day like that, the rest of his weekend was incredibly anti-climactic.

Chapter End Notes

Join me in wailing about Severus Snape's incredibly maladjusted ideas about child-appropriate educational techniques. (He never curses children in canon, but then, he never felt the need to give anyone a five-minute lesson in dueling in canon, either.)
At the beginning of his first private lesson with Professor Snape, Harry felt the need to clarify something.

“The next time you hex me, I’m going to get Fred and George to put up posters of you all over the school in the dress, with the vulture on your head.”

Snape’s nostril’s flared.

“I am not in the habit of hexing students, no matter the provocation, Mister Potter. I trust you took my point?”

Harry didn’t say ‘I’ve had nightmares every night this week about green light and laughter.’ He didn’t say ‘sane people make points by talking, not by cursing each other.’ He didn’t say a lot of things.

“You have my word that I will not hex you.” Snape seemed like he was going to add something, but thought better of it.

“If you want to teach me to duel, I’ll learn,” Harry added. “It seems like it’ll turn out useful one way or another.”

“Survive to be fifteen, and we’ll talk.”

Harry grinned briefly.

“I’ve done alright so far.”

“Arrogant as ever. Tell me, why do you want to learn Potions?”

Harry blinked at his professor.

“I thought you knew.”

“Despite what you may believe, you are not so very much the center of my world that I feel the need to know every thought that skitters through your mind.”

Which was Snape for ‘answer the question.’

“Because it’s beautiful,” Harry said, after a moment. “Elegant. And different from duels and Quidditch – those are all about where you are now, but Potions you have to have a plan for, except when you need to improvise….” He trailed off, not certain how to put it into words.

“You respect the Art.” Professor Snape did not turn to look at Harry, or stop what he was doing, which was setting up a cauldron on one of the benches at the front of the classroom. “You realize you have no talent for it?”

Harry waited, hoping it was a rhetorical question, but Snape seemed content to let the silence continue.

“I’m mostly good at Quidditch, but Potions is what I want to do.”

“Come watch,” his teacher invited, and Harry pulled up a stool to watch his professor prepare a
potion. Every movement was precise, every gesture spare, conserving every motion. It was not quite beautiful – Severus Snape was not someone who cared enough about how he looked for his actions to be beautiful – but his knife was a silver blur and his expression was remote and Harry wanted to be him.

“You’re sometimes exactly like your father,” he said, laying out the ingredients, measuring them into shallow bowls. Harry stayed very quiet, because someone in a talkative mood about his father always had his attention. “And sometimes you are nothing like either of your parents. He got into a great deal of trouble at school, and caused a great deal of trouble. He was always laughing, and he was very good at Quidditch.”

Snape began crushing peppercorns in a mortar with controlled violence. Harry blinked wildly, worried he’d sneeze and interrupt the flow of words.

“Your mother, on the other hand, was good at everything. Everything she touched turned to gold.” A flicker of a glance Harry’s way. “Metaphorically speaking.”

Harry nodded.

“Neither of them turned their hand to subjects that they did not have a talent for.”

A flick of Snape’s wand ignited the fire beneath the cauldron and set it to heating. Harry tried to draw his mind back to the present, with very little success.

“I don’t really know anything about them,” Harry said. “Aunt Petunia doesn’t talk about mum except to make up lies about her.”

The professor said nothing to this, adding his first ingredient with a flick of his fingers.

“Is this Pepper-Up Potion?” Harry asked, to fill the silence.

“Indeed. The Hospital wing will be needing it, once the October rains begin. I usually put it together in larger batches.”

“Why not this time?”

“Because you are easily distracted.”

Harry glared, because that was definitely an insult.

“You said I could learn to make Polyjuice.”

“Polyjuice is restricted because it is easily used for deception, not because it is particularly difficult. The ingredients are rare, and the process slow, but it isn’t difficult if one has the necessary discipline.”

Harry thought guiltily about Aunt Marge, and said nothing about his overall level of discipline.

“How did you steal the recipe from the Restricted Section?” Snape asked, as if he was asking Harry to pass the potatoes.

“I asked Professor Lockhart for a pass.”

Snape snorted.

“And I’m supposed to believe you’ll wait innocently playing with your friends while Black stalks
“Well, I am,” Harry said. “I said I would, didn’t I? And I’m not actually stupid.”

This didn’t seem to merit a comment.

“Is there a potion for sleeping?” Harry asked abruptly. “My headache potion doesn’t do much good if…”

“Madame Pomfrey is supplied with Dreamless Sleep,” Professor Snape said. “It is, like Calming Draught and most other potions with beneficial effects, addictive over time.”

Darn.

“Your homework for next week will be a history of the development of the Pepper-Up potion and ideas for improvements to the recipe.”

Harry wilted. More homework. The look in Snape’s eyes was far too cheerful, too.

Professor Snape was, at heart, still a sadist.

#

Bringing up where he could try some magical candy or ice cream recipes to Fred and George was at once a very good and very bad idea.

“Oh, you poor ignorant child. Fred, we have no choice.”

“We have no choice, George.”

And with that, each of them took Harry by an arm and frog-marched him downstairs, to introduce him to the Hogwarts kitchens.

Harry’s life was never the same again.
Educational Montage

Harry’s first successful magical candy recipe was for little multi-colored sugar dots that melted on your tongue and let you blow iridescent bubbles. He wouldn’t have managed it at all, except he explained what he wanted to Fred and George and they came back with a couple half-finished plans of their own, and somewhere in there he got boiling sugar in his hair and had to go to the hospital wing, but Harry couldn’t quite bring himself to care.

The candies were banned from three classes within a day, after Harry passed them on to Fred and George to pass out to people to test.

#

“Professor Trelawney says I’m going to die,” Harry commented to Professor Snape, during the fourth straight tutoring session where Professor Snape hadn’t actually let him touch anything. Not that he minded sitting on his hands and watching magic happen, but not talking made him feel invisible, and that made him feel trapped. No thank you.

“And you’ve begun seeing death omens everywhere?”

“Well. Yes.”

“I avoid her,” Snape said evenly. “Whenever I remember she exists, I have a powerful urge to kill her.”

As Professor Snape seemed entirely serious, Harry decided to never, ever bring up his divination professor again. He didn’t really want to be the one who tipped Professor Snape over the edge.

#

“...and then he rearranged his name to say I Am Lord Voldemort, and I stabbed the diary with a basilisk fang. I might have missed a few things during that last part, I was bleeding and Fawkes crying on me was pretty distracting.”

“If you keep yourself out of the hospital wing this year, Potter, I will show you how to make Fossilizing Fog out of powdered basilisk eyes.”

“You mean – from that basilisk?”

“Are you aware of another basilisk that has been killed recently? They are not common beasts.”

“...I didn’t really want to kill her. There just wasn’t time.”

“Save your sympathy, if you will.”

“Slytherin didn’t really get lucky having Voldemort as their heir, did they?”

“You picked up the persistent habit of naming the Dark Lord from the headmaster, didn’t you.”

“He said it was a good idea. That we shouldn’t be frightened of a name.”

“Fear is a healthy trait. It shows you are paying attention.”

Harry didn’t really have anything to say to that, but thankfully his teacher didn’t expect him to.
Harry looked curiously at the goblet. Lupin smiled.

"Professor Snape has very kindly concocted a potion for me," he said. "I have never been much of a potion-brewer and this one is particularly complex." He picked up the goblet and sniffed it. "Pity sugar makes it useless," he added, taking a sip and shuddering.

"Why --?" Harry began. Lupin looked at him and answered the unfinished question.

"I've been feeling a bit off-color," he said. "This potion is the only thing that helps. I am very lucky to be working alongside Professor Snape; there aren't many wizards who are up to making it."

Professor Lupin took another sip and Harry had a crazy urge to knock the goblet out of his hands.

"He’s brilliant at potions," Harry said cautiously, not sure how to put ‘and has murder in his eyes every time he looks at you.’

Luckily or unluckily for Harry, Professor Lupin smoothed over the awkwardness as if it had never existed, and Harry was left wondering if he should warn Professor Lupin or beg Professor Snape for the recipe.

#

"Are you poisoning Professor Lupin?"

Snape’s lip curled.

"If only, Potter. If only."

This was not particularly reassuring. Harry hesitated, then plowed on.

"I heard you talking to Professor Dumbledore, on Halloween. About how you thought someone inside the castle was helping Black."

Snape took a pinch of blue powder and flicked it into the potion he was working on, turning it a delicate lavender. One of the maddening things about watching him work was that it was readily apparent that while he expected Harry to stick to the recipe, he wouldn’t know a recipe if it bit him. If it said to dice, he crushed. If it said measure two tablespoons precisely, he threw in a handful. If it said stir for five minutes, he stirred for five repetitions of an obnoxious song instead. It was hateful.

"You told me about-"

"Potter."

"But, Professor… he helped Voldemort kill…"

"He will die," Professor Snape, in a tone that came eerily close to gentle, "And it will be a painful, horrible death. Be content with that."

Getting to know Professor Snape this year was really not comforting at all.
“Those lessons Professor Snape’s been giving you, has he said anything at them about Professor Lupin?” Ron asked after Snape’s disastrous turn as their Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. Harry frowned.

“Not really. He mostly has me watching him work while he talks about discipline.”

“Sounds mental.”

“He’s the only Potions professor we have,” Harry said, a little defensively.

“I know, mate, but I worry about you. He’s had it in for you since first year, and now he agrees to teach you? It doesn’t add up. It’s not like he’s being any nicer. Bed pans.”

Harry clapped Ron on the shoulder and changed the subject to Quidditch, determined to cheer his friend up. And added werewolves to a short mental list entitled ‘Severus Snape Wants To Murder’

#

The first Quidditch game of the season ended with Harry in the hospital wing and his broomstick in shattered pieces. His broomstick and his first Quidditch loss were at the top of his mind, but he had so much free time to brood that he fit in a few minutes to think about what Professor Snape would say.

(“If you keep yourself out of the hospital wing this year, Potter, I will show you how to make Fossilizing Fog out of powdered basilisk eyes.”)

No, knowing Professor Snape he wouldn’t even have to say anything, just look at Harry.

Harry had almost managed to fall asleep Saturday night when the curtain around his bed rustled. His visitor didn’t say a word.

Harry froze, with the unsettling certainty that it was Sirius Black come to murder him. If he went for his wand, would he be in time? He held very, very still.

“Ah, Severus,” came the headmaster’s welcome voice, “Here you are.”

“Headmaster,” Snape said stiffly.

“Standing guard?”

“I was checking the potions stock here to see what needed replacement.”

“Not checking on Harry?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“You could be a little less hard on the boy, Severus. He looks up to you.”

“You should find that as disturbing as I do, headmaster.”

“There is wisdom in leaving the past in the past.”
“Not that. Never that.”

“He isn’t his father, Severus.”

“That… is not the problem. Surely you must see why this is twisted.”

“I see a young boy who respects you.”

“No.”

“Then you will cease mentoring him?”

“I never started—”

“Severus.”

Harry tried very hard not to breathe.

“Very well,” Dumbledore said, in a very gentle tone. “We won’t speak of it again.”

“Thank you, headmaster,” Snape gritted out, and Harry heard the curtain rustle again.

“Harry,” Dumbledore said, and Harry opened his eyes, wincing against the dim light and that gentle, inexorable look in Dumbledore’s twinkling eyes. He didn’t know why Dumbledore hadn’t just twinkled Voldemort to death, it absolutely would have worked.

“I must ask you to be patient with him,” Dumbledore continued. “We each have our own path to walk, but Severus has never had an easy one. Rather like you yourself.”

Harry would really like to know what Dumbledore knew about Harry’s path. Sometimes the fact that Dumbledore knew everything was less comforting than other times.

Dumbledore sighed.

“Or you could develop an interest in knitting,” he suggested more lightly. “It’s very peaceful work.”

Harry laughed softly.

“Good night, my boy. Rest well.”
It was nearly December, and Goyle loomed abruptly out of the shadows of the stairwell. Harry peered up at him through his hair. Apparently being tall wasn’t enough to intimidate Harry anymore. He pulled out his wand and waited for Goyle to talk.

“You never told anyone I tried to smash your head in those times. Why?”

Harry thought back to his first year and its frantic pace. ‘It never occurred to me that anyone would help’ probably wouldn’t be a strong answer.

“Well, you were just trying to protect Draco, right?” Harry tried cautiously. “Because he’s your… friend?”

“Right,” Goyle grunted.

“He says it’s his job to protect you, you know.” Harry had been curious about that for a while.

“He’s tiny. Little tiny white kitten.” Goyle sounded puzzled, but that wasn’t unusual. Almost anything was enough to puzzle Goyle.

“I don’t think he’d like you saying, er, that.”

Tiny kitten?

“…we protect each other. That’s what friends do, isn’t it?” Goyle sounded doubtful.

“That’s what friends do,” Harry agreed, trying to parse Greg Goyle and mutual loyalty in the same thought. It didn’t really work, but he kept his expression clear.

“Right.”

“Ah – why bring it up now?”

“Talking about Black. In Azkaban.”

“Yes…?”

“Wanted to know if I owed you.”

“Because you… could have been expelled or sent to prison for attempted murder, and you weren’t?” Harry hazarded.

“Right.”

Talking to Goyle was incredibly exhausting. Harry did not know how Draco did it.

“We were kids. How about just….” What the hell was he supposed to say to this. He didn’t want Goyle owing him anything. It was creepy. “We’re even, okay? Don’t worry about it.”

Goyle considered this, and Harry concentrated on looking calm and collected.

“Next time I hex you, I’ll miss,” Goyle said, with a nod, and ambled off down the stairs.

Slytherins were so disturbing.
Harry had dropped by Professor McGonnagall’s office to see if she was in - he halfheartedly wanted to tell her about the Grim and mostly wanted an excuse not to, when he heard Draco’s voice. Harry had never yet resisted a prime opportunity to eavesdrop.

“I have had a letter from your father, Mister Malfoy. I understand congratulations are in order.”

“Thank you, Professor McGonnagall,” Draco said stiffly.

“Of course, I would have absolutely forbidden a student at your level from attempting – but I would have, apparently, been wrong. You must be very proud.”

“…you haven’t told anyone, have you?”

“Well, no. Certainly not.”

A minute’s silence.

“I see, Mister Malfoy. I understand entirely. And these things do change, with time. My lips are sealed.”

Draco stalked out of her office, met Harry’s eyes in a furious glare and hissed, “This is your fault.”

Harry watched him go in absolute confusion, and just as Draco turned the corner at the end of the hall, was equally surprised to hear his usually prim and proper professor fall into giggles.

What had Draco done?

Harry was feeling detached enough at the next Potions class to let it all wash over him. Draco’s taunts, Snape’s sarcasm, the endless interplay….

They’re showing off for each other, he thought in a sudden burst of icy clarity. Neither of them are this awful on this own, but put them both in a room with me and it’s like it’s a competition for Who Can Be Nastiest To Harry.

It put him in a bad enough mood during that evening’s tutoring session, one of two he had each week, that he said, “If I don’t do something at one of these evenings I’m going to go mad.”

“I’m so glad you volunteered, Potter. End of term essays need to be checked. You may work on the first and second years.”

After that, Harry was a lot quicker to join Ron’s chorus of ‘Slytherins: they are the worst.’
Harry couldn’t go looking for Sirius Black, but he hadn’t promised anything about Sirius Black coming to him. That was, if not his reason, perhaps his excuse for taking a walk near the castle’s foot, enjoying the crisp snow on the ground and ignoring the voices in his head that sounded like Hermione and Ron and the professors. Those voices were better than remembering his mother’s voice, begging. Almost anything was.

A shadow on the snow made him jump – something coming out of the shadows of the forest, moving low and dark and fast over the snow, and the sound of – barking? Yes, a dog barking. Harry watched in bemusement as he watched a dark, shaggy dog sprinting flat-out as if hell was on its tail. Eyes that were used to catching glints of gold across a whole Quidditch pitch finally brought what he was seeing into focus. A shaggy black dog was chasing a tiny white shape – a cat? No, a kitten-

A tiny white kitten.

Its – his – ears were flat back and his eyes were wild, and his white fur was puffed up so Harry couldn’t see where cat ended and snow began. Desperately trying to remember a spell for dealing with animals, and reassuring himself that at least werewolves looked nothing like dogs, Harry bolted on an intercept course (even if it probably was Malfoy).

The kitten saw Harry and changed trajectory, scrambling up Harry’s robes with a ear-splitting yowl and spitting at the dog from Harry’s shoulder.

The dog looked into Harry’s face, pinned his ears back, and whined piteously.

Harry resisted the urge to rub his forehead to push aside the impending headache.

“Easy, boy,” he said to the dog. “You don’t want to eat him. He’d taste awful.”

The cat swatted at his ear. With claws.

“I mean, he’s very elegant. Noble animals, cats.”

The dog snorted doubtfully, flopping down in the snow in apparent despair and covering his nose with his paws. Harry squatted down gingerly and held out a hand.

“I’m sorry, boy. I’m sorry I thought you were a Grim, too.” This did not appear to make the dog feel any better. “You look terrible.” Again, no improvement. Harry wasn’t sure what he was expecting. Draco appeared content to sit on his shoulder and pretend to be an actual cat. Unless it was an actual cat and Harry was going mad.

He’d end up freezing to death if he tried to figure this out out here, and then Sirius Black wouldn’t even have to murder him.

“Come on, you two,” Harry said, with a lightning-fast lunge to grab the dog’s ruff. “I know the way to the Hogwart’s kitchens, and you’re both too thin.”

The cat hissed at him softly, but didn’t scratch him again, which Harry took as the only win he could get.
“If you bite me, I’m not talking them into giving you any ham pie,” Harry informed the dog, on the theory that wizarding animals were often quite weird. It seemed to work, at least enough for the dog to scarf a whole pie and fall asleep by the fire.

The cat had a bowl of milk and then planted himself firmly in Harry’s lap, pinning Harry there.

“You’re going to make me late to Quidditch practice,” Harry informed the kitten, which had dried out into an absolute little puffball. He was certainly going to be an elegant cat eventually, but right now all his legs were too long and he looked like nothing so much as a fur collar.

The cat flicked a white ear in apparent complete acceptance of Harry being late to Quidditch practice, as the House Elves bustled around them delighted to have people to serve.

“You know,” Harry said, very aware that Draco had claws now, “You remind me of one of my classmates. His name’s Draco. Sometimes we get along and sometimes we don’t. He’d be fine with me being late for Quidditch practice, too.”

The tip of the kitten’s tail twitched. Harry resisted the urge to think it was cute. It was a good shape for Draco, he thought. Small, cute, and absolutely evil.

“But Draco knows I have really good blackmail on him,” Harry continued quietly, so as not to wake the dog. “So he wouldn’t try to make a fuss about it, especially since I saved him from being eaten by a dog ten times bigger than he is.”

With incredible dignity, the cat got up and jumped down to land squarely on the dog, which startled awake with a savage growl.

“You are so terrible with animals,” Harry hissed at Draco, tired and furious.

The cat refused to look at him, but one ear flicked. So he wasn’t being ignored, was he?

Draco was a lot easier to like as a cat, Harry thought ruefully. Evil little beast.

“Next time I’m letting him eat you,” Harry said severely, and with that, he went to Quidditch practice. Served Draco right.

#

Harry's second attempt at luring Sirius Black into trying to murder him, sneaking out to Hogsmeade weekend, led to nothing except a lot more detail about the murderer who betrayed his parents. On the one hand, it was nice to be able to share it with Hermione and Ron, but on the other, he really didn't want to talk about it. He didn't know what he wanted to do about Sirius Black, and extra time to try to decide hadn't brought him anything but more nightmares. And Hermione and Ron meant well, but neither of them felt it the same way.

Even if he never talked to Professor Snape about it again, he wouldn't forget the feverish light in his eyes as explained about Sirius Black.

#

Going to visit Hagrid wasn't an attempt to lure Sirius Black out of hiding, but it did give Harry an idea how he wanted to use his blackmail with Draco.

Draco had other ideas.
"It isn’t as if you have any proof, Potter,” he said, sticking his nose in the air.

"Professor McGonnegall said at the beginning of term that there’s a registry animagi have to be on,” Harry said helpfully. "A public one. I bet it'd be pretty easy for me to get a copy. The ministry likes me this year."

"...it is your fault, you know," Draco said, after a sullen silence. "You and your talk about me being a dragon animagus."

Since Harry wanted Draco's help, he kept a straight face.

"Look, all you have to do is say Buckbeak's not that bad, it was a mistake, you were mucking about."

"Oh, yes, and how would that look to the panel."

"It’d be fine. My uncle lets my cousin Dudley get away with way worse than insulting a hippogriff, I'm sure your father would understand."

“Your did not just compare my father to your horrible muggle uncle.”

"That's not what I meant, and you know it."

His uncle Vernon didn't try to murder children, for one thing. Harry tried to make his face look diplomatic.

“My father,” Draco plowed on, “Loves me. Everything he does is to better our family and preserve our greatness. What does your uncle do for you? I know he doesn’t want you, any idiot could see that.” Draco perked up and asked with cheerful curiosity, “Does he hit you?”

Harry stared at him.

“He does, doesn’t he. You really should give over about muggles, they’re really awful. I’ve only met a few, of course, but father’s told me all about them and I’ve read the histories.”

“Not every muggle is like my uncle,” Harry said, fighting the urge to rush to Uncle Vernon’s defense. ‘He’s never managed to hit me because I dodge’ was not a ringing endorsement of mugglekind, really.

“Well, it’s the ones that are like your uncle that I want to keep an eye on.”

“You mean murder.”

“That’s a compromise, isn’t it? Just dealing with the bad ones.”

Harry kept his eyes on Draco as he fumbled in his bag, pulled out his headache potion, and downed a whole jar of it.

It didn’t really help. **Draco Malfoy** being the person to notice there was something really wrong with the Dursleys was going to stick in Harry’s mind for a long time. Which, actually-

Draco watched him curiously, giving the impression of a cat at rest at a mousehole.

“It’s not as if you even like fighting,” Harry said, because he was trying to visualize Draco Malfoy murdering people (and not think about the Dursleys).
“Did you just call me a coward, Potter?”

Diplomacy, blast it.

“That’s not what I meant and you know it. Just - wouldn’t you rather arrange for two of your enemies to stab each other in an alley somewhere, while you were having a nice cup of tea across town?”

“I suppose it would cut down on bloodstains,” Draco said more cheerfully.

“They’re hell to get out of robes,” Harry agreed, relieved. The trick to having a civil conversation with Draco Malfoy, he thought, was to assume Draco had only a passing relationship with the reality everyone else lived in. The reality Draco lived in meant people relaxed while talking about blood and were offended if someone suggested they weren’t a natural born murderer.

*Why* he wanted to have a civil conversation with Draco was still a good question, but Harry thought it had something to do with the way Draco was continually, endlessly unimpressed by him. It was a nice change from Colin and even Ron, who tended to accept Harry’s place as the Boy Who Lived as Harry’s due. At least, it was a nice change in small doses. Harry wouldn’t actually want to talk to Malfoy for more than a couple minutes every few months. He might accidentally suggest Draco wouldn’t murder a toddler with his own two hands or something horrible like that.

"I'll think about my testimony at the beast's trial," Draco said. "Don't get your hopes up."

Harry nodded, and escaped the conversation before Draco could realize that more than anything in the world, Harry didn't want Draco thinking too long about Harry's muggle relatives.

Chapter End Notes

For best effect, realize I was thinking about Emperor's New Groove throughout this scene: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUWA-HdI1NI
"Professor Lupin?" he said. "If you knew my dad, you must've known Sirius Black as well."

Lupin turned very quickly.

"What gives you that idea?" he said sharply.

"Nothing -- I mean, I just knew they were friends at Hogwarts too..."

Lupin's face relaxed.

"Yes, I knew him," he said shortly. "Or I thought I did. You'd better be off, Harry, it's getting late."

The dog was back in the kitchens during the first week of term when Harry snuck down between classes to ask the House Elves if he could have a snack. It had been washed at some point in the past few weeks, and was gnawing enthusiastically on a turkey carcass. Harry settled down next to him to eat his cauldron cake.

"They think you’re my dog," Harry confided. “I’m not going to tell them you’re not, they’d kick you out and it’s snowing again, but I really don’t have time for a dog. I’ve got extra lessons with Snape and Lupin and I think they’re going to break down and try to kill each other any day now."

The dog paused its gnawing to give him a doggish look.

"You don’t know who any of these people are. That’s alright. Then there’s Ron and Hermione, who aren’t talking, and Neville, who’s going to have a nervous breakdown over Potions, and everyone thinks my new Firebolt’s evil."

That was probably more than a dog needed to know.

"You’re a good listener, Grim," Harry informed him. “I bet I could find someone who could give you a home somewhere in the castle – not Draco, though – he was the cat you met. I bet he taunted you, he’s like that. He’s done his best to get a hippogriff killed this year because – I’m really not sure why Draco Malfoy does anything. If I had...""

If I had a mum and dad at home that loved me, I’d spend less time acting like a miserable git, Harry finished his thought to himself.

"It’s good they’re feeding you."

Harry got a wet nose in his face, and hugged the dog awkwardly.


The dog huffed at him, and Harry sighed and heaved himself to his feet. Back to work.

"Did you know Professor Lupin at school, too?" Harry asked Professor Snape while his teacher inspected Harry’s diced acorns. He figured it was good timing, since Professor Snape already had
something to criticize.

At Snape’s look, Harry realized he’d misjudged the situation badly, but it was too late to back out.

“Professor Lupin is your teacher, and you will offer him the proper respect.”

“I respect him loads. He’s been teaching me the Patronus,” Harry said, taking the change of subject and running with it.

“You failed to mention this.”

“It’s not as if I tell you all about my day,” Harry said, crushing beetles. He’d picked up the habit from Professor Snape of imagining that whatever he was crushing today was his current problems. Crush goes people who suspect an innocent broomstick. Crush go dementors.

“I was not suggesting gossip. Reporting unusual behavior would be… appreciated.”

“He’s unusually competent for a Defense professor, if that’s what you mean.”

There was a faint snort, and Harry turned to look at Professor Snape, whose expression was completely smooth.

That couldn’t have been real, could it? Harry had to be hearing things.

Well, unusual behavior….

“Did you know Draco’s an animagus?”

“As his Head of House, it’s my responsibility to monitor the situation. I am, however, curious how you became aware of it. I was not aware you and Mister Malfoy were on familiar terms.”

Avoiding the question neatly, Harry replied, “He’s been picking fights with housepets. He used me as a decoy when one of them bit back.”

Harry studied Snape’s expression, which he found unusually impossible to read, but didn’t let it throw off his timing on adding the beetles to his potion.

“Professor?”

“Imagine, if you will, Lucius Malfoy’s expression if informed that his precious heir was picking fights with housepets, Potter.”

Harry imagined, and then he started to laugh.

“You will not repeat that,” Snape added. “I may not enjoy my job, but I intend to keep it.”

“Why are you even a teacher, if you hate kids so much?”

“Because the headmaster has a soft spot for lost causes,” Snape replied in clipped tones.

“Er.”

“Hagrid. Binns. Filch. Trelawney. Lupin. Do you think that they were hired because they were the best and brightest of their field? I assure you, it is not the case.”

“But you’re great at potions. Um. Aren’t you?”
“There is more to being a teacher than being a Potions master.”

Harry couldn’t actually disagree with that. At all.

“I am very well aware of who and what I am. Headmaster Dumbledore is simply… an eternal optimist. I admire that, even if I cannot replicate it.”

Harry considered and discarded ‘you could try being a better teacher, you know,’ as something likely to get him hexed, or at least exiled from extra Potions lessons. Uncertain what to do with this side of his teacher, he settled for returning to dicing his unicorn hair and making sure his flame kept burning purple.
"The news of the week, Potter?"

"Professor McGonnegall still won’t return my Firebolt. I don’t suppose you could- no, sorry, forget I asked."

"Miraculous. He learns."

Harry ignored this sarcasm as beneath him.

"And how are your little friends?"

"Ron and Hermione aren’t talking to each other because her cat keeps trying to eat his rat,” Harry said, gingerly adding his catfish whiskers to the potion. “And Hermione’s not talking to me because I sided with Ron a little and we both have too much homework."

"It was my understanding that Miss Granger assisted you with your homework."

"I don’t know. I’ve been too busy trying to figure out the reading about Undetectable Poisons to figure out Hermione."

Professor Snape considered this statement with apparent calm and then vanished the potion they’d been working on for more than an hour.

"Professor!"

"It does me no good to attempt to impart the most fundamental skills of potion-making if you fail your third-year classes because you do not understand the basic curriculum.” Snape stalked away. “Clean that up.”

"Getting cross with me isn’t going to help,” Harry said amiably. “It just makes you look like you need a blood pressure potion.”

Harry was furious as well, but he had different ways of coping with his anger.

"What,” Professor Snape said with icy clarity, “Is your problem with Undetectable Poisons?"

"The textbook,” Harry said immediately. “The explanations you give in class are alright, but it just takes me a long time when I can’t ask Hermione to explain the diagrams and things, and she sniffs at me if I ask her for advice these days."

“I suppose I assumed… were you educated in basic comprehension and arithmetic before Hogwarts, Potter?”

“I was never much good at maths,” he said doubtfully.

“Throwing you into an Arithmancy class at this point would undoubtedly be funny, but it probably wouldn’t be effective,” Snape said half to himself.

Harry hated Snape’s sense of humor.

“Very well. Throw yourself on your friend’s mercy. Beg her forgiveness, agree with her that her cat is a paragon among cats, tell her that teaching others is a good way to learn material, whatever you
have to do to regain your place in her good graces.”

“Is that why you made me grade all those papers? I dreamed I was bleeding green ink all over the Chamber of Secrets.”

“Do not use your nightmares to change the subject.”

“I’m not lying to Hermione for you.”

“Were any of the things I just said a lie?”

“…well, her cat’s awful.”

“All cats are awful. Next.”

“She told Professor McGonnegall my broom was probably from Sirius Black and out to kill me. It’s a Firebolt.”

“Ah, Quidditch. The sport more important than a girl who has faced down the Dark Lord with you, undoubtedly.”

“It’s not about that!”

“Then what is it about?”

Harry hesitated, because he wasn’t quite sure.

“Harry, admirable and sensible though I find your lack of trust in anyone resembling authority, you must understand something, in order to interact with most people. Most people trust authority, and obey rules. You are the outlier, not Hermione Granger.”

Harry shifted uncomfortably.

“Do you miss your friend?”

Harry nodded.

“Then say that you forgive her, because that is what friends do. Even if you may never understand her reasons.”

“…you’re just trying to manipulate me into getting her help with homework.”

Snape looked rather blank.

“I don’t have enough stuff to want people taking it,” Harry added.

“Do as you’re told, Potter.”

Since arguing would get them nowhere fast except giving Professor Snape more material, Harry dug in his bag for his half-completed essay on Undetectable Poisons.

#

“I made you thinking mints as an apology,” Harry began.

His apology speech, which ended up rushed, incoherent, and rather angry, went on for a few minutes, before Hermione tucked her hair behind one ear and asked, “What are thinking mints?”
“They’re peppermints with concentration potion in them. Professor Snape says they won’t poison anyone and are an abomination against the Art, but he also said that since they’re almost useless as a way to take concentration potion you can have as many as you want and they will help you study, I’m almost certain, and even if they don’t they’ll still taste good?”

Hermione tried a mint. Hermione burst into tears.

Harry patted her on the back, feeling incredibly awkward.

“Awful – boys – Professor Vector – Crookshanks,” were the only words Harry could make out through her storm of emotion. None of them really helped him figure out what to do. He shot a frantic look across the common room at Ron, who hadn’t thought this was a good idea in the first place. No help there.

“But, look, at least no one’s trying to kill you, right?” Harry hazarded. “That’s good, isn’t it?”

“I care if someone wants to kill you!” Hermione said, and threw a book at him. Harry ducked, and Hermione spent the next minute fussing over her book, which was undamaged by its use in the gender wars.

A short while later, they were both sitting by the fire, tired and out of sorts and no closer to peace.

“Professor Snape told me to ask you for help, but… it seems more like I should be asking if I can help.”

“I’m really enjoying all my classes,” Hermione said lowly.

“But, how…?”

“That’s not the point.”

“You don’t like divination.”

“I’m sure there’s something to it. I’m going to learn everything there is to know, Harry.”

“Professor Snape’s going to get me one of those math and reading books with the big letters and primary colors because I admitted the textbook’s hard. It’s hard for everyone but you, isn’t it?”

“Everyone does seem to have a great many questions about it, but it’s a very traditional book. It’s been in use at Hogwarts since the 19th century.”

“No wonder Professor Snape never uses the recipes when he’s making his own potions,” Harry commented, distracted. “He’s a big believer in using all the most modern innovations in potion making, I bet it drives him batty.”

“Professor Snape doesn’t use the recipes?” Hermione asked, sounding betrayed.

“He just throws things into the cauldron,” Harry confirmed, slumping in his comfy armchair and staring at the fire. “Then I ask how much he used and he says ’a handful’ like that’s a real measurement. I hate him so much.”

“You know, Harry… I thought if you actually started getting lessons with him about Potions, you’d get along better. But it doesn’t seem like it….”

“He’s brilliant. Corking mad, but brilliant. When he’s in a good mood – which is really almost never
– you can tell he’s in a good mood because he’ll talk about the ways poisons used to be used to torture people and how he’d really like to murder more people than he’s allowed to murder.”

Harry glanced at Hermione to find her staring at him in open-mouthed horror.

“It’s not like – I mean, I asked him if he was poisoning Professor Lupin and he said ‘if only.’ Things like that.”

“Well, of course he’s not poisoning Professor Lupin,” Hermione said, startled. “That would be impossible without-“

“He gives Professor Lupin an awful-looking potion every month,” Harry told her. “It looks absolutely caustic, and he won’t tell me what it is.”

“It must be Wolfsbane,” Hermione said absently. “That would make sense, he’s-“

“Professor Lupin is a werewolf?” Harry hissed.

Hermione looked guilty, and grabbed his hand.

“Oh, you can’t tell anyone, you mustn’t. You know what Ron’s like about werewolves.”

“Does Dumbledore know?” Harry said, starting up from his seat.

“Of course! I’ve known ever since Professor Snape explained. I’m sure all the teachers know, it’s not our business, Harry.”

Harry sat down again, hesitant.

“I thought werewolves were a little, er. Dangerous.”

Eat people.

“They’re terribly discriminated against, I looked it up – it’s like Buckbeak, they’re considered dangerous magical creatures.”

The bottom dropped out of Harry’s stomach as he imagined Professor Lupin on trial, with the same precedents to draw on that Buckbeak had.

“And the Wolfsbane potion means he won’t hurt anyone. Say you won’t tell anyone, Harry, please?”

“Alright,” Harry said numbly. “I won’t.”

So did Professor Snape want to kill werewolves because of Professor Lupin, or want to kill Professor Lupin because of werewolves? It made it hard to keep a mental list of things Professor Snape wanted to kill straight, it really did.

Harry and Hermione got along better after that, even though they still didn’t have time to breathe in a welter of schoolwork.

And then there was the next Quidditch match…. 
Making up with Hermione wasn’t as simple as one conversation, especially with Scabbers missing, but it made Harry feel a little better about the whole mess.

Watching the whole school laugh at Draco for a change after Harry won the match for Gryffindor was really lovely, though it was rather ruined by Sirius Black turning up in Harry’s bedroom when Harry was too far asleep to fight him. Harry settled for making a mental note to talk to Draco about how while he appreciated Draco not being more of a berk than he absolutely had to be, he still needed Draco to understand that being normal levels of awful was going to get himself a Patronus to the face.

On second thought, Draco probably learned that already. Back to Black.

#

“What are those spells you cast at the beginning of every afternoon?” Harry asked, watching Snape’s practiced wand movements and sharp, quiet words.

“Wards against eavesdropping and entry, and one to alert me if anyone tries anything. I didn’t live through the last War by being careless.”

Harry put his bag down, and glanced up at his teacher.

“Which side of the war were you on, sir?”

“Don’t ask questions you don’t want to know the answers to, boy.”

Harry tried to decide if he should go for his wand.

“I believe I have made myself clear about which side of the coming War I will be on,” Snape said very softly. “To the people in this room. It will remain unclear to people outside this room, do you understand me?”

“No. Not really, sir.”

“Good. Then we may begin the lesson.”

It was a subdued review of potions history, and Harry found it hard to keep his mind on the task at hand.

At the end of the lesson, Snape asked, “Do you trust me, Harry Potter?”

“…not for all the world, sir.”
“Then there may yet be hope. You may go.”

Harry hesitated.

“Yes? I do have things to do besides coddle you, child.”

“Do you hate Professor Lupin because he’s a werewolf or do you hate werewolves because of Professor Lupin?” Harry asked hurriedly. It’d been bothering him, and he couldn’t bring himself to ask Professor Lupin about it, when Professor Lupin was kind to him and always looked very tired.

That got an actual smile from Professor Snape.

“An interesting philosophical question. Now, when – ah. Granger. I shall have to consider the answer to that one carefully.”

“How do you think Black’s getting into the castle?” Harry asked, because letting Snape brood about his hatred of his fellow professor seemed like a way for this year’s defense appointment to end in murder and/or sacking for attempted murder.

“Haven’t we covered that?” Snape asked.

It took Harry a minute.

“Professor Lupin wouldn’t do that.”

“You do not know Remus Lupin.”

“…good night, sir,” Harry said doubtfully. He’d be late to Quidditch practice if he didn’t get on with things, so he left it there.

#

Sneaking out to Hogsmeade right under Snape’s nose did not make Harry feel particularly good about himself as a student, but on the other hand, if he waited to have fun until no one was trying to kill him, he’d be dead and still not having any fun.

*Harry, feeling hot from their climb, was just considering taking off the cloak for a few minutes when they heard voices nearby. Someone was climbing toward the house from the other side of the hill; moments later, Malfoy had appeared, followed closely by Crabbe and Goyle. Malfoy was speaking.*

"...should have an owl from Father any time now. He had to go to the hearing to tell them about my arm...about how I couldn't use it for three months..."

*Crabbe and Goyle sniggered.*

“I asked father if it might be useful to show mercy as a gesture, but he said it made the Headmaster look weak to be unable to save a giant bird.”

“Mercy’s bad,” grunted Crabbe.

“Well, I know that,” snapped Malfoy, rolling his eyes. “Obviously. I just meant the *appearance* of mercy.”

“I think the cat thing’s done something to your brain,” Crabbe added.

Draco bared his teeth in a snarl.
“Say that again,” he hissed.

“Sorry, Draco,” Crabbe said, hanging his head.

“You’re forgiven,” Malfoy sniffed.

_Malfoy suddenly caught sight of Ron. His pale face split in a malevolent grin._

“What are you doing, Weasley?”

_Malfoy looked up at the crumbling house behind Ron._

“Suppose you’d love to live here, wouldn’t you, Weasley? Dreaming about having your own bedroom? I heard your family all sleep in one room -- is that true?”

_Harry seized the back of Ron's robes to stop him from leaping on Malfoy._

“Leave him to me,” he hissed in Ron’s ear.

“If this is how Crabbe is about your kitten problem,” he whispered invisibly in Draco’s ear, “Imagine what Ron will do with it.”

Draco huffed.

“Out of our way, Weasley. You’re not worth our time.”

Draco stalked away, every inch of his body language furious. Harry had a bad feeling about this, somehow.

“What’d you do?” Ron asked, curiously.

“Threatened him.”

“He won’t like that. Cor, he’ll tell Professor Snape right off—“

Oh, blast it.

Harry broke into a run.

#

_Back into Honeydukes, back down the cellar steps, across the stone floor, through the trapdoor -- Harry pulled off the cloak, tucked it under his arm, and ran, flat out, along the passage... Malfoy would get back first... how long would it take him to find a teacher? Panting, a sharp pain in his side, Harry didn’t slow down until he reached the stone slide. He would have to leave the cloak where it was, it was too much of a giveaway in case Malfoy had tipped off a teacher -- he hid it in a shadowy corner, then started to climb, fast as he could, his sweaty hands slipping on the sides of the chute. He reached the inside of the witch's hump, tapped it with his wand, stuck his head through, and hoisted himself out; the hump closed, and just as Harry jumped out from behind the statue, he heard quick footsteps approaching._

_It was Snape. He approached Harry at a swift walk, his black robes swishing, then stopped in front of him._

“So,” he said.
There was a look of suppressed triumph about him. Harry tried to look innocent, all too aware of his sweaty face and his muddy hands, which he quickly hid in his pockets.

"Come with me, Potter," said Snape.

Harry followed him downstairs, trying to wipe his hands clean on the inside of his robes without Snape noticing. They walked down the stairs to the dungeons and then into Snape’s office.

Harry always seemed to be in trouble when he was in Snape’s office. Snape had acquired a few more slimy horrible things in jars since last time, all standing on shelves behind his desk, glinting in the firelight and adding to the threatening atmosphere.

"Sit," said Snape.

Harry sat. Snape, however, remained, standing.

"Mr. Malfoy has just been to see me with a strange story, Potter," said Snape.

Harry didn't say anything.

"He tells me that he was up by the Shrieking Shack when he ran into Weasley -- apparently alone."

Still, Harry didn't speak.

"Mr. Malfoy states that he was standing talking to Weasley, when your ghostly voice interrupted the conversation. How do you think that could have happened?"

Harry tried to look mildly surprised.

"I don't know, Professor."

Snape's eyes were boring into Harry's. It was exactly like trying to stare down a Hippogriff. Harry tried hard not to blink.

"Mr. Malfoy, naturally, reported this extraordinary apparition to me, out of concern for your safety."

There was a long silence.

"Maybe he'd better go to Madam Pomfrey," said Harry. "If he's hearing things like --"

"What would your voice have been doing in Hogsmeade, Potter?" said Snape softly. "Your voice is not allowed in Hogsmeade. No part of your body has permission to be in Hogsmeade."

"I know that," said Harry, striving to keep his face free of guilt or fear. "It sounds like Malfoy's having hallucin --"

"Malfoy is not having hallucinations," snarled Snape, and he bent down, a hand on each arm of Harry's chair, so that their faces were a foot apart. "If your voice was in Hogsmeade, so was the rest of you."

"I've been up in Gryffindor Tower," said Harry. "Like you told --"
"Can anyone confirm that?"

Harry didn't say anything. Snape's thin mouth curled into a horrible smile.

"So," he said, straightening up again. "Everyone from the Minister of Magic downward has been trying to keep famous Harry Potter safe from Sirius Black. But famous Harry Potter is a law unto himself. Let the ordinary people worry about his safety! Famous Harry Potter goes where he wants to, with no thought for the consequences."

Harry stayed silent. Snape was trying to provoke him into telling the truth. He wasn't going to do it. Snape had no proof -- yet.

"What exactly is your word worth, Potter? Do not seek out Black, I said. Do not travel alone."

"I didn’t do either," Harry said, jerking his chin up.

"I thought we were beyond playing word games, Mister Potter."

"…I said I wouldn’t seek him out. If he comes to me-"

"If you are going to put yourself as bait for a trap, I expect you to have the sense to provide yourself with more backup than Ronald Weasley. Did you even bring Granger?"

"I’m not telling you anything that’d get me expelled," Harry said severely. "You still want me packed up and living with the Dursleys, don’t you."

"You have survived them for nearly fourteen years. Three more and you will be of age, and alive."

"It doesn’t matter to you that I hate them?"

"I am not your guardian. If I have taken on the Quixotic task of trying to keep your heart beating, it does not mean…" Snape trailed off, unusually incoherent. "It would not be appropriate, Mister Potter. That is the place of your father, and he and I were not… suffice to say that it would probably make both your parents unhappy, were you to look to me for happiness."

Harry wrestled with this, his parent’s ghosts against his happiness, against the Dursleys, against survival.

"Do you think it would have been better if they’d let Voldemort kill me?" he asked abruptly. "If they hadn’t protected me, they’d be alive."

The silence went on for a long time.

"We will respect your mother’s decision in the matter."

"But-"

"We will respect your mother’s decision in the matter."

Harry took a shaky breath, aware suddenly he’d been holding his breath. Your mother, he thought, adding it to a mental list of questions. Battle-light glinted feverish in Snape’s eyes, and Harry knew somehow that this was another of those moments that could so easy tip over into violence.

"Turn out your pockets, Potter!" he spat suddenly.
Harry didn’t move. There was a pounding in his ears.

“Turn out your pockets, or we go straight to the headmaster! Pull them out, Potter!”

Cold with dread, Harry slowly pulled out the bag of Zonko’s tricks and the Marauder’s Map.

Snape picked up the Zonko’s bag.

“That’s mine.”

Perhaps it will teach you something, then, to lose it.”

Harry seethed silently.

“And the other?”

Harry was silent.

“I see. I suppose it’s a small step up from lying to my face.”

Snape turned it over, his eyes on Harry.

“Surely you don’t need such a very old piece of parchment?” he said. “Why don’t I just -- throw this away?”

His hand moved toward the fire.

“No!” Harry said quickly.

“So!” said Snape, his long nostrils quivering. “Is this another treasured gift from Mr. Weasley? Or is it -- something else? A letter, perhaps, written in invisible ink? Or -- instructions to get into Hogsmeade without passing the Dementors?”

Harry blinked. Snape's eyes gleamed.

“Let me see, let me see...” he muttered, taking out his wand and smoothing the map out on his desk. “Reveal your secret!” he said, touching the wand to the parchment.

Nothing happened. Harry clenched his hands to stop them from shaking.

“Show yourself!” Snape said, tapping the map sharply.

It stayed blank. Harry was taking deep, calming breaths.

“Professor Severus Snape, master of this school, commands you to yield the information you conceal!” Snape said, hitting the map with his wand.

As though an invisible hand were writing upon it, words appeared on the smooth surface of the map.

“Mooney presents his compliments to Professor Snape, and begs him to keep his abnormally large nose out of other people’s business.”
Snape froze. Harry stared, dumbstruck, at the message. But the map didn't stop there. More writing was appearing beneath the first.

"Mr. Prongs agrees with Mr. Mooney and would like to add that Professor Snape is an ugly git."

It would have been very funny if the situation hadn't been so serious. And there was more ...

"Mr. Padfoot would like to register his astonishment that an idiot like that ever became a professor."

Harry closed his eyes in horror. When he'd opened them, the map had had its last word.

"Mr. Wormtail bids Professor Snape good day, and advises him to wash his hair, the slimeball."

Harry waited for the blow to fall.

"So..." said Snape softly. "We'll see about this..."

He strode across to his fire, seized a fistful of glittering powder from a jar on the fireplace, and threw it into the flames.

"Lupin!" Snape called into the fire. "I want a word!"

Utterly bewildered, Harry stared at the fire. A large shape had appeared in it, revolving very fast. Seconds later, Professor Lupin was clambering out of the fireplace, brushing ash off his shabby robes.

"You called, Severus?" said Lupin mildly.

"I certainly did," said Snape, his face contorted with fury as he strode back to his desk. "I have just asked Potter to empty his pockets. He was carrying this."

Snape pointed at the parchment, on which the words of Messrs. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs were still shining. An odd, closed expression appeared on Lupin's face.

"Well?" said Snape.

Lupin continued to stare at the map. Harry had the impression that Lupin was doing some very quick thinking.

"Well?" said Snape again. "This parchment is plainly full of Dark Magic. This is supposed to be your area of expertise, Lupin. Where do you imagine Potter got such a thing?"

Lupin looked up and, by the merest half-glance in Harry's direction, warned him not to interrupt.

"Full of Dark Magic?" he repeated mildly. "Do you really think so, Severus? It looks to me as though it is merely a piece of parchment that insults anybody who reads it. Childish, but surely not dangerous? I imagine Harry got it from a joke shop --"

"Indeed?" said Snape. His jaw had gone rigid with anger. "You think a joke shop could supply him with such a thing? You don't think it more likely that he got it directly from the manufacturers?"

Harry didn't understand what Snape was talking about. Nor, apparently, did Lupin.
"You mean, by Mr. Wormtail or one of these people?" he said. "Harry, do you know any of these men?"

"No," said Harry quickly.

"You see, Severus?" said Lupin, turning back to Snape. "It looks like a Zonko product to me --"

Right on cue, Ron came bursting into the office. He was completely out of breath, and stopped just short of Snape's desk, clutching the stitch in his chest and trying to speak.

"I -- gave -- Harry -- that -- stuff," he choked. "Bought -- it...in Zonko's... ages -- ago..."

"Well!" said Lupin, clapping his hands together and looking around cheerfully. "That seems to clear that up! Severus, I'll take this back, shall I?" He folded the map and tucked it inside his robes. "Harry, Ron, come with me, I need a word about my vampire essay -- excuse us, Severus --"

"Do you take me for a fool, Lupin?" Snape asked dangerously. "Potter and I were not finished with our discussion. He had a couple questions for me, about werewolves."

Harry twitched guiltily at the odd, closed look on Lupin’s face. He really should have talked to Professor Lupin about that before now.

"If Harry has questions about werewolves, I’ll be happy to answer them for him," Lupin replied mildly.

“But I can speak from personal experience. After all, his father did think it would be funny to trick me into almost being eaten by one, in school. I can’t quite remember – did you find that funny, Lupin?”

Ron looked incredibly awkward. Harry felt incredibly awkward. He knew he’d upset Snape, but watching the man take it out on Professor Lupin was awful.

“Enough, Severus,” Lupin said firmly. “We were schoolchildren. If you want to talk about our school days, I would be happy to, at some other time.”

Snape’s eyes glittered in his sallow face, and Harry thought very quickly.

“I’ve been working on mixing calming draught and hot chocolate,” he interrupted. “I thought it’d be a nice change from butterbeer or chocolate bars. For some reason it makes all the House Elves really manic.”

Ron made a throat-slitting gesture along the lines of ‘are you crazy, why are you trying to attract his attention?’

“Heating calming draught disturbs the essence and ferments it,” Snape said very slowly. "In humans it causes tremors and visual migraines. You’ve been testing recipes on the House Elves, Potter?"

Harry grinned, because that was normal teacherly anger, not cool murderous rage. He was getting better at this!

“The headmaster will hear about your little escapade, Potter. Go, before I lose my temper.”

Lupin ushered Harry and Ron hastily out of the room.
One of the interesting questions we wrestle with in this scene is 'would Snape kill Harry to bring Lily back to life.' I think he'd absolutely want to, but would he? This is my answer, for whatever it's worth.
“How’d you get Snape to let you off?” Malfoy asked in a furious whisper during the next Potions class. Tensions were running high with the Quidditch cup on the line, and Ron was watching Malfoy narrowly.


“It’s too bad he can’t use potions on students. A bit of veritaserum and you’d be hung up by your heels where you belong, and I wouldn’t have to bother beating you at Quidditch.”

“In your dreams. Why are you so hung up on cheating, anyway?”

“It’s called being cunning, Potter.”

“How would you like it if I bribed you with a big bowl of clotted cream to throw the match?”

If Draco’d been in his cat form, his whiskers would have twitched.

“I can get my own cream, thank you,” Draco said haughtily, and went back to his potion.

Harry snorted.

#

“I’ve known for ages,” Harry said to Professor Lupin during Dementor practice. “Hermione told me at Christmas. It doesn’t matter. I mean, it matters, but-“

“It’s quite all right, Harry. I understand. Did Professor Snape say anything else?”

“No really. I don’t understand why not.”

“Sometimes it’s best for the old to leave children to find their own way, without the burdens of the past.”

Harry thought that was a load of rubbish, but was too polite to say so.

#

Professor McGonnegall and Professor Snape had a tense conversation and Harry ended up out of Potions lessons for the duration of the lead-up to the Cup match in Quidditch. Harry didn’t complain, as it meant he had time for more sleep (and more nightmares).

Winning the Cup was glorious. Neither Draco nor Snape could look at him for a week. They both pretended he didn’t exist, and it was the most perfect, restful week had ever had.

Topped off by a kitten dropping on his head as he walked between classes in a classic example of death from above, raking at his eyes with tiny claws. Harry wrestled it off him and ducked into an alcove, shoving his glasses up his nose and holding the struggling cat up and away from him.

“What would you stop? Someone’ll hear!”

The kitten scratched him one more time, then ceased moving. Harry was very tempted to shake him, but set the tiny beast down on the stones and adjusted his glasses instead.
“Look, Malfoy, it was a good game, alright? You almost beat me.”

The kitten puffed up fury and growled at him.

“Alright, it was a terrible game, but if you assume cheating is alright then that was some good cheating.” Harry sat down cross-legged on the floor, so as not to loom. “Professor Snape says the only redeeming quality of Quidditch is as war by other means. So, you lost this battle. There’s always next year, if you don’t get in trouble for clawing my eyes out.”

A flicker of magic, and Draco was adjusting his robes and leaning against the wall, casual as if he hadn’t been trying to maim Harry a few seconds ago.

“No need to be condescending, Potter.”

“I wasn’t trying to be condescending,” Harry said, standing and tucking his hands into his pockets.

“You manage it without trying, believe me.”

“I don’t see what you’re so angry about. You won on Buckbeak.”

“No, my father won. I… have not yet lost.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means I may call upon you to lend me that unfairly convenient invisibility cloak, one of these days.”

“…are you saying you’ll help?”

“I dislike losing. Good day, Potter.”

Tiny little evil animal. Huge, huge ego.
Draco Malfoy's Excellent Adventure

Being able to turn into a kitten may have made him the laughingstock of his dorm room and drawn far too much professorial attention, but it was excellent for sneaking. He was below the eye level of all the portraits, and he was far from the only cat in the castle.

Not that he was in the castle, right at the moment. The weather was good, the trees were beginning to leaf out, and being a cat made it much easier to avoid thinking about his father’s latest letter. He didn’t know what his father was thinking, reminding him that only the strong could expect to learn powerful magic.

Draco pounced savagely on a rustle in the long grass, felt fur under his paws, and let instinct guide him as he bit down hard. Another vole. He sniffed it, then batted at it with a paw. Dead. Good, he thought. He wasn’t weak. He was a predator.

Draco sniffed it again, on the off chance it would come back to life and entertain him. The vole remained stubbornly dead.

He batted at it with a paw, causing it to roll interestingly.

It wasn’t as if he was going to eat it, he had his standards, but….

He batted at it with the other paw, and the chase was on.

#

It wasn’t that Draco couldn’t ignore the cat instincts if he wanted to. He could. His was a complete, perfect transformation. It’s just that sometimes he didn’t particularly want to be human. The cat didn’t feel pressure the same way, it didn’t have anything to live up to. Give it something to kill and a warm place to sleep and it was happy.

He was lying on his side panting in the grass, cursing the long walk back up to the castle in this form – he was almost to the forbidden forest, though not under the shadow of the trees – when he saw a large orange kneazle moving purposefully away from the castle.

Curious. Draco got to his feet, stretched, and stalked cautiously after it. It was a horribly large cat, at least three times his size, and having to switch shapes to defend himself was beneath his dignity. Better not to be seen.

Draco topped a small rise and dropped flat to the ground on his belly, because that was Sirius Black talking to that cat, crouched in the shade of a dell behind one of the first trees of the Forbidden Forest.

Could he catch him? Could he be the hero of the school, for once? On the other hand, should he catch him. After all, Sirius Black was supposed to have been one of the key supporters of the Dark Lord, trusted to infiltrate the inner circle of the other side, a closely held secret only revealed upon the Dark Lord’s death. That wasn’t the sort of person you crossed.

He could get an Order of Merlin. Maybe a Firebolt from his father – and facing down an adult wizard would definitely make his father change his mind about worrying about Draco going soft in Dumbledore’s pernicious influence.

On the other hand, rushing in to get himself killed was a Gryffindor thing to do….
Jaws closed around the knape of his neck, picking him up *like a kitten* and carrying him towards Sirius Black. Draco squirmed in panic and rage, but mostly panic.

“You again,” Black said.

Draco paused. Again?

“You can understand me?” Black asked.

Draco lashed his tail and squirmed. The huge orange beast put him down on the grass and Draco shook himself. His fur was going every which way, it was *awful*.

“Cats are getting smarter all the time,” Black said, sounding a little lost. *Good.* Someone other than Draco should be feeling confused right now. Perhaps he should just wander off, while Black was thinking.…

Crookshanks hissed warningly. Draco flattened his ears at the beast, keeping a wary eye on it.

“But Crookshanks doesn’t trust you. Sorry, cat, but I can’t take the chance.”

That – that was a knife. No, *thank you*.

With a rush of the still unfamiliar magic, Draco was human again, stepping backwards and drawing his wand in one motion, leveling it between Black’s eyes.

“I’ll thank you not to move, cousin.”

“That hair – Malfoy. Narcissa’s boy.”

“Draco,” Draco agreed, taking another wary step back, having one second to feel something furry behind his ankles before he was falling backwards.

It wasn’t gentlemanly to swear. Draco thought the worst thing he could, and then Black was wrestling with him, and Black had his wand. *Wonderful.*

Black pointed it at him and barked a word.

Nothing happened.

He shook it briskly, and absolutely nothing happened.

“What’s your wand core, boy?”

Draco looked up his wand at Black and decided that he and Black were going to be friends. Cousins should be friends.

“Unicorn.”

“Ah. Never was any good with unicorn. Strange wand for a Malfoy.”

“May I have it back, please? After all, I can’t be any help without a wand.”

“You. Help.”

“Well, certainly. We’re blood, aren’t we?”

“…you can get up.”
“Wonderful.”

Draco got up and brushed the grass stains off his robes. Ugh, peasant problems.

“I need a rat.”

“To eat?”

“No. I need Ronald Weasley’s rat.”

“Ronald Weasley’s rat is dead. There was a great deal of fuss about it, two months ago. Killed by this cat here, I believe.”

“He faked it.”

“The rat faked it,” Draco said, and cut off his snide remark at Black’s dark look. “Of course, cousin. As you may imagine, I am aptly suited to the task of locating your missing… rodent. I would be happy to assist you, if you do something for me.”

Draco straightened his tie, and hid his fear behind a blank mask.

“I need you to steal a hippogriff.”
Everyone Lies

It was, of course, much more complicated than that, but having an ulterior motive did wonders for Black believing that he'd cooperate with a wanted murderer. Draco couldn’t help but think back to his father’s explanation, two summers ago. (The trick is to have more than one ulterior motive.)

Black’s explanation of what he wanted with the rat was something else, too. It warmed Draco’s heart to imagine Weasley’s expression when he heard that he’d been sleeping with a Death Eater. Why Pettigrew didn’t slaughter them all in their beds, though, eluded him… obviously a coward, and thus not useful.

Draco squared his shoulders, and took a breath. He’d given Black fifteen minutes to move from the spot where Draco had seen him, if the man had any sense at all. Alright, let’s make this good… after a moment’s thought, he ripped his sleeve sharply, as if it had been torn during a struggle. Expression horrified and scared, eyes wide, out of breath as if he’d been running – the grass stained robes and mussed hair probably added something to the effect. He loosened his tie a little, he wouldn’t have been thinking to straighten it if he were an innocent victim…

He pounded frantically on the door to Snape’s office.

“Professor Snape! Sir, I’ve just seen Sirius Black by the forest!”

Dutifully report intruders to his Head of House: check.

Look like he survived a fight with a mass murderer: check.

“Where?” his professor asked, standing abruptly, eyes alight.

“Near the edge of the forest – I was out practicing my transformation, I ran all the way back. Sir, he’s mad, he spent ages giving me a silly speech about how he was wronged and never served the Dark Lord and had to find a rat animagus called Peter Pettigrew-“

“How long ago was this?”

“I ran all the way here, sir,” Draco promised, and swayed artistically.

To his delight, his Head of House looked as if he wanted to curse.

“Do you need the hospital wing?”

“No, sir! I’m fine, really I am. I got my wand back,” he added, because that last part made the struggle sound nice and fierce and not as if he’d been manhandled by a cat.

“Come in and sit down,” his professor said gently. “I’ll get you a calming draught and you can tell me about it. Black will have bolted, but I’ll send a message to the guards.”

“Yes, sir,” Draco said. The calming draught was very nice, though he only pretended to drink most of it. He didn’t want to lose control of his tongue. This was delightfully delicate work. Professor Snape stepped out, and Draco was left alone to think through his story.

There was no reason to hide anything from Professor Snape, so Draco wouldn’t. He could tell the whole story – leaving aside the timing, circumstances, most of what Draco himself had said, and Draco’s plans for Black. The whole story, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.
“Come, Draco,” Professor Snape said from the doorway. “There’s no reason for you to repeat yourself more than once, so we’ll see Professor Dumbledore together.”

“He’s not going to take points, is he? I think I should earn some for being heroic, myself.”

Professor Snape smiled at him.

“I wouldn’t get your hopes up about that, myself. His favoritism towards his Lions is too strong to expect much, but we must do our duty to ensure Black is captured.”

“I was thinking – professor, I can tell my father about this myself, can’t I? He doesn’t need to be called. I wasn’t injured, just startled.”

“How did you manage that feat?”

Draco smiled.

“I talked very quickly indeed, sir. I think you would have been proud.”

“I’m pleased you are safe. Perhaps next time leave the wild adventuring to the Gryffindors? We won’t miss a few of them if they manage to meet with accidents.”

Draco laughed.

“I’m not eager to meet him again, sir. It’s just that ever since I hurt my arm earlier this year, my father’s been concerned for my welfare. I don’t want to worry him.”

“Understandably. It was a dreadful injury,” Professor Snape said dryly.

“Truly awful,” Draco admitted cheerfully.

“And the disruptive effect on Rubeus Hagrid’s class was a completely unforeseen side effect.”

“I don’t want to speak ill of a teacher, sir,” Draco said in his most earnest tone, the one that always got a smile – and true to form, there it was. He knew what he meant, and Professor Snape knew what he meant, but neither of them said it. It was wonderful.

Professor Snape really was the most wonderful teacher. Draco’s steps slowed as they reached the headmaster’s office.

“Mister Malfoy, the headmaster will not bite.”

“He gave me quite the lecture on being a responsible animagus,” Draco said quietly, eyeing the headmaster’s door. “As if I was a common criminal who’d done it in order to – to steal pocket watches.”

“Why did you attempt the spell? I’d thought your interest in Potions genuine.”

“…I’m sorry, sir. I am interested in Potions. You’ll think it juvenile, I’m sure-“

“Allowances can be made. Please, tell me.”

“Potter dared me to, sir. In first year.”

“That… is a very dangerous dare to make. You could have died, or been lost.”
“You know I don’t have a good thing to say about him, but it was ignorance, not malice, in that case. He doesn’t know any better. Why they thought they should let muggles raise someone who was of good wizard’s blood – he could have been great, sir.”

“Indeed. Are you composed? I do not think that is a thought you should share with the headmaster.”

“Yes, sir. I’m ready now.”
Baby's First Xanatos Gambit

Professor Snape’s explanation of Draco’s narrow escape from Black’s clutches made it sound even worse than Draco had been meaning to make it sound. Draco sat stiff-backed and proud under the headmaster’s eye, mind clear except for what had been running through his head when faced with Black threatening him with his own wand.

*I need to say whatever I have to say to get out of this.*

Draco explained, when prompted, almost everything Black had said in his ramble about Pettigrew and murdering Pettigrew and everything being his fault. The headmaster’s face grew grave, especially at the description of the rat and the photograph Draco had been shown in the Daily Prophet of the rat and the Weasleys in Egypt.

“This has gone on long enough,” was Professor Snape’s contribution. “Surely you must see now that they were all involved, in one way or another. Let me question him.”

“I think I will do that, Severus. You may witness, if you like.”

“That would be appreciated, headmaster,” Snape said stiffly.

“Is there anything else you want to tell me, Draco?” the headmaster said, twinkling at him. It reminded Draco of a snitch, which reminded him of the feel of pouncing on mice with his paws and bearing down. Snap of teeth, breaking bone.

Draco shook his head, more because he could tell he was nervous when he started fantasizing about going hunting than because he remembered the question.

“Shall we call it 25 points from Slytherin for putting yourself in unnecessary danger and reckless use of Animagus transformation… and 50 points to Slytherin for quick thinking in a dangerous situation?”

Dumbledore thought he was very clever. Draco bowed shortly, and made himself scarce.

“Fawkes, if you would fetch Remus for me,” he heard the headmaster saying.

They were probably going to institute a search. Well, Draco would do his own searching, later. He’d more or less given his word to try to locate Pettigrew, and while he didn’t feel any particular attachment to promises made to a disaster like Black, the plausible deniability of attempting to keep his word appealed to him. After all, then it wouldn’t be his fault if he failed. Pettigrew was supposedly an adult wizard, after all.

#

Draco had time to think over dinner and pumpkin juice. If he was, for once, unusually quiet, none of his classmates commented, which was just as he liked it. Most of the staff were missing from the head table, apparently scrambled to deal with the new problem of another dark wizard running around Hogwarts unchecked. It was good to have incompetent enemies, but really, why they hadn’t fired Dumbledore before now.

Black wanted Pettigrew, and would rescue Buckbeak in return.

Professor Snape wanted Black, and Pettigrew was an afterthought.
Professor Dumbledore wanted Black and Pettigrew, and wanted Draco to stay out of it.

Pettigrew, presumably, wanted to avoid everyone on the aforementioned list because they wanted to throw him to the Dementors, but might possibly have a soft spot for Ronald Weasley.

Ronald Weasley probably wanted his rat back, come to think of it.

Harry Potter wanted Black dead, but Harry was, as usual, ignorant.

Draco wanted the hippogriff rescued, preferably in a way he could blame on Hermione Granger or Harry Potter. Other than that, he wanted this all sorted out before exams and in a way that no one felt the need to inform his father he was mucking around with disgraced Death Eaters and mass murderers. He also wanted the Dementors out of his school already.

So. The fastest solution to this problem was to find Pettigrew and… fight him? No, that was stupid. Warn him to get out of the school, because everyone was onto him. Tell him he had to get out of the country, give him a little pocket money for travel… directions to the nearest Muggle train station? Let Black know what direction he’d gone so they could have their big confrontation someplace else, and Draco could sit his exams in peace.

Kill Pettigrew if the opportunity came up, probably. It’s not as if anyone would miss him, and there were some curses Draco had been curious about trying that couldn’t be solved by the hospital wing….

It was self defense, sir! Draco rehearsed in his head, and smiled.

Now, let’s see. What could he add to this situation to attain maximum chaos. The headmaster was the most tricky part of this whole plan, but there was only one of him….

Draco’s gaze slid around the great hall and settled firmly on Ronald Weasley and Harry Potter. Yes, that would be perfect.
There was a scramble of sound from the head table, and out from under the cloth came a tabby cat with square eyeglass markings, with a large grey rat clutched firmly in her jaws. She hopped neatly up onto the head table, to survey the room.

“Er, Professor McGonnegall?” asked Ronald Weasley, standing up. “That’s my rat.”

Tail curved in a questionmark, she strode unhurriedly from the room, still carrying the large rat. Weasley hurried after her, with Granger and Potter a few steps behind.

Well. Events were moving faster than Draco liked, and that was the truth.

“I’ll go see what’s happening,” he said unnecessarily, patting Greg’s arm. “Stay here and finish eating, it can’t be very important.”

He was going to follow Potter, but he caught sight of a ginger cat in the entry hall and paused, considering. He glanced around – no witnesses. A flicker of concentration, and a white kitten padded over to the larger cat. They stared at each other as only cats could.

After a long few moments, both decided they were far too important to fight the other, and the ginger cat padded away downstairs, the white cat following.

#

That large black dog was back in the kitchens, Draco noticed.

_Oh._

He concentrated, shifted human, and took a seat. A House Elf put a slice of cake down next to him, and he picked it up and started eating. Watching the dog warily.

Peter Pettigrew, an unregistered animagus. Well. This was a coincidence, wasn’t it.

“They’ve caught him, I think,” Draco said, and watched the dog’s body language go from wary to angry, nearly snarling.

“Don’t bark at me,” Draco added more sharply. “Isn’t this more efficient than two cats trying to cover an entire castle? They’ll give him veritaserum and it’ll all be sorted out, I don’t know what you’re complaining about.”

The dog growled, low and dangerous. Draco defiantly had another bite of cake.

“What about the hippogriff?” Draco asked softly. “Any progress?”

It was amazing how disinterested a dog could look, if it tried.

“Don’t give me that. I can leave it like this, and you never get a chance at blood for blood,” Draco whispered. “You go near Pettigrew now and they’ll have you. But I can go. I’ll bring him out to you, but only if you take the hippogriff now. You only have a little while to decide, they’ll be calling aurors once Dumbledore’s had his turn to do an interrogation.”

The dog’s tail thumped once, twice, three times, before it heaved itself to his feet.
“Is that a yes?”

The dog nodded slowly.

“Good.”

Thinking about it, Draco could see why Black would be so focused on his revenge – any reasonably hotblooded wizard would be, losing a bosom friend to betrayal like that. It just went to show that blood traitors or not, the old blood bred true.

It occurred to Draco that he’d just agreed to break a Death Eater out of Dumbledore’s custody on behalf of an escaped prisoner of Azkaban.

Well, at least he wasn’t letting the side down.

It was probably Harry’s terrible influence, urging him on to have adventures and save the day.
Playing Checkers With a Chessmaster

It was easy enough to slip into the headmaster’s office as Professor Lupin was hurrying out of it, in cat form. Draco trotted silently up the stone steps and slipped into the office unnoticed, planting himself under a convenient armchair.

Professor Dumbledore and Potter and his pets were joined by the Minister of Magic and Professor Snape, glowering horribly at the cowering Pettigrew, tied to a chair and mid-interrogation.

Draco listened with half an ear to Pettigrew spilling all sorts of interesting details, Professor Snape shouting, Harry shouting, even Ron shouting. He could have lived without Pettigrew’s begging – so undignified, if informative.

The Minister of Magic pulled Dumbledore aside for a whispered conversation. Draco tilted his head and cocked an ear to catch more of it.

“Must see this puts me in a difficult position—” that was Fudge.

“In the interest of justice….” Dumbledore.

“Memory charms – confounded – you yourself said—“

“Surely you see that it merits…”

And more, too faint to hear.

“Right,” Fudge said, raising his voice once more. “We’ll arrest them both and sort it out at the trial. Only thing to do.”

“Severus, could you take the children back to their dormitory? And Minister, I trust this means that the Dementors will be removed?”

“I suppose it does,” Fudge said distractedly. “Peter Pettigrew, my word….”

With a nod from Professor Snape, Harry and company were ushered out.

“Are you alright, Cornelius?”

“Never been better!” the Minister said heartily.

“Perhaps a cup of tea?”

Draco found himself dozing. He woke when he realized Pettigrew was moving – Dumbledore was no longer in the room, and two strangers were dragging Pettigrew down the stairs. Draco brought himself back from almost dashing out from under his sheltering armchair with a jerk, and banged his head on the underside of the seat.

The aurors thumped down the stairs, and Draco waited for one, two, three flicks of his tail before padding after them, wishing he’d had more to eat at dinner. At the entrance he pressed himself to the base of a gargoyle, stiff as a board, because the hallway was alight with spelllight and the aurors yelling at each other about Pettigrew getting away – why did the Ministry hire no one competent?

They split up to chase down different hallways, and Draco pushed away the instinctive urge to mew piteously.
He sniffed the stones of the floor. Shoes, shoes, lemon candy, rat. Draco trotted off on the hunt, all other concerns momentarily forgotten.

Draco came back to himself halfway through pouncing on a rat nearly as big as he was, and promptly panicked. The rat was panicking too, so it was quite the circus for a minute there.

Draco thought quickly, dropped it, and changed shapes.

“Do you want to get out of this castle or not?” he asked in a fierce whisper.

The rat’s whiskers twitched, paralyzed in terror, but Draco held out an empty hand and it sniffed it doubtfully. It knew who he was, obviously. Good, that should help.

“Come on. Quickly.”

And miracle of miracles, someone actually listened to Draco. He stuffed Pettigrew in his robe pocket, made sure it didn’t show and very slowly and gently strolled out towards Hagrid’s hut in the deepening twilight.

Where neither a hippogriff or Black were waiting. The sun had set, and Draco peered in the window – Hagrid was in there, but no giant murderbird. Blast, blast, blast, Draco was losing track of how many plans he’d had to discard in the past few hours, this was ridiculous. This sort of thing wouldn’t happen to his father or Dumbledore. And it was dark out here, which meant Dementors or werewolves.

Draco ventured a little further down the path, and deposited rat and a bit of pocket money on the ground.

“I suggest you get out of here.”

Pettigrew transformed, saying something ridiculous about kind, generous boys-

“You owe me,” Draco said. “For your life and freedom. I’ll remember.”

“You… are very like your father, young master Malfoy,” Pettigrew said. Pettigrew made an obvious compliment sound suspect somehow. Really, today had been far too long and far too strange.

Pettigrew disappeared into the darkness, and Draco was left wondering if victory always felt so… odd.

Draco could have killed him. He’d had a wand and Pettigrew had nothing, hadn’t even been looking at him. Draco knew the incantation and the intention. Avada kedavra and perfect indifference, and if there was ever anyone you could feel indifferent about, it was Ronald Weasley’s pet rat and complete failure of a human being Peter Pettigrew. He’d even planned it out earlier, cursing Pettigrew when his back was turned for practice. And then Draco just hadn’t done it. In the moment, it hadn’t even occurred to him.

Maybe Vince was right and becoming an animagus really had done something to him.

#

He sighed in relief as he closed the main door behind him.

“Mister Malfoy,” said the headmaster quietly.

Draco jumped far enough he thought he’d end up on the ceiling, freezing with a pale face and hand
over his mouth.

“I think I must ask you to accompany me to the hospital wing, Draco. You’re shaking.”

Draco attempted to make his hands stop shaking, thank you. It did not really work. At all.

Still, he managed to walk next to the headmaster in a semblance of calm, hands firmly in his pockets.

“Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew are believed to both no longer be at Hogwarts,” the headmaster said, as if talking about the weather. “Sirius Black stole a hippogriff to make his escape in most dramatic fashion. Hagrid cannot decide whether to be overjoyed or angry.”

Draco grunted.

“The hippogriff was named Buckbeak. His appeal was going to be slated for a week and a half from now. I did not hold out much hope.”

Draco tried to summon up venom past the buzzing in his mind and managed, “I hope the hippogriff eats him.”

“It seems unlikely. Humans are not his primary diet, and when not provoked into violence, hippogriffs are rather gentle.”

“They’re giant murderbirds, professor,” Draco informed him.

The headmaster was surprised into a laugh.

“I believe,” the headmaster said after a short pause, “I understand everything that happened here today except for the hippogriff.”

Could blood freeze? Draco felt like his blood was freezing. They walked in deepening silence up another flight of stairs.

“Perhaps I should inform your father of events today?”

“No- that is, that is, I’m sure he’ll be informed in due time.”

“He would want to know that his heir is-“

“I’m fine,” Draco snarled.

“I can see that,” the headmaster continued, very mildly. “But for my own comfort, I would like Madame Pomfrey to check. And a night in the hospital wing will explain where you have been most adequately, don’t you agree? It might be better for everyone that everything tonight is adequately explained.”

“You can’t be happy with how things have turned out tonight.”

“I am an old man, and I very seldom get everything I want in life. None of my students were hurt, and more than one innocent life may have been spared.”

“And the guilty?” Draco asked in morbid curiosity.

“I would rather spare the guilty with the innocent than strike down the innocent with the guilty.”

Draco shot his headmaster a tired look, because all of those words made sense and the grammar was
correct and yet he’d managed to say complete nonsense.

“Mercy, my boy, is not weakness.”

They walked in silence for a little while.

“No one seems to understand that I don’t care about the hippogriff,” Draco said. “It’s not even human. Whether it lives or dies truly makes no difference to me, even if I think it shouldn’t ever be allowed around children again.”

He glanced over at the headmaster, who twinkled at him as he met Draco’s eyes.

“But you count Harry as a friend, and Harry cares about the hippogriff,” the headmaster observed. “Your prank went a little too far, and you didn’t know how to stop it without drastic measures.”

Draco physically recoiled, and only a hand on his arm kept him from falling down the stairwell.

“Friendship is a delightful thing,” the headmaster continued happily.

“I know you’re delighted. You would be delighted.”

“Not to worry, Draco. I believe everything will work out for the best.”

Draco was in an absolutely miserable mood when he was delivered to the hospital wing, and Madame Pomfrey’s fussing only went so far to soothe it. He dozed off to daydreams of how to make Harry’s life really miserable. He could definitely come up with something good and humbling…. 
**Lupin Leaving**

Chapter Notes

The middle section is an unholy amalgam of canon and non-canon. Skipped italicizing the canon bits because it would have just looked messy, but they're not mine.

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**PETTIGREW'S TESTIMONY**

*Black the Avenger?*

The headlines of the *Daily Prophet* mocked Harry over breakfast at the end of exams. Snape didn’t look any more happy, Professor Lupin was absent from the head table, and Draco was glaring at Harry sullenly, just as he had been all week. Harry wasn’t even sure what he’d *done* this time, but gossip quickly gathered Draco had been in the hospital wing for some reason the night Harry had been neatly cordoned off from confronting his godfather.

It was Ron’s idea to confront Draco, but Harry thought it seemed like a very good idea. Draco had been unusually isolated this week, but it was still odd to catch him in the hallway sans minions.

“Oy, Malfoy,” Ron said. “We want a word with you.”

“You’re welcome. That’s two.”

“As if you’ve done anything to be thanked for,” said Ron.

“Come now, Harry,” Draco said, looking past Ron as if he didn’t exist. “Surely you realize that someone other than you can save the day sometimes? And I even managed to wrap it up *before* final exams. The words you’re looking for are ‘thank you, Draco.’”

“Black *and* Pettigrew escaped. How is that wrapping anything up?” asked Harry.

“Didn’t you learn anything from the hippogriff’s trial?” Draco drawled. “You want your precious godfather facing Ministry justice?”

“Buckbeak never got his appeal,” said Hermione. “He would have won! Now he can’t, and running away from the trial looks ever so bad.”

“He didn’t run, he was stolen.”

“And that means Harry’s godfather will face charges for theft, even if he’s innocent of all those murders,” Hermione retorted.

“He’s a Black,” Draco said, raising an eyebrow in his best and most infuriating ‘you muggle-raised will never really be part of our world, why do you even try’ look.

“That doesn’t mean he’s immune to laws,” growled Ron.

“Ah, of course, Weasley, your family can’t *afford* basic things like lawyers, can they.”

“Baiting people is the first resort of the insecure mind,” claimed Hermione, grabbing Ron’s sleeve
before he could lunge.

“Is this going to take much longer? I need to go to the owlery and deliver these,” Draco said, gesturing with a pack of letters. “I have to tell everyone I know that Professor Dumbledore’s been letting a werewolf teach us all year. Speaking of, did you know Professor Lupin’s a werewolf?”

Harry and Hermione both winced, even as Ron exclaimed.

“When’d you figure it out?” asked Harry.

“Oh, I heard Professor Snape remind Professor Lupin about his Wolfsbane at breakfast. He’ll be sacked by dinner, if he isn’t already.”

Harry had heard enough.

Lupin’s office door was open. He had already packed most of his things. The Grindylow's empty tank stood next to his battered old suitcase, which was open and nearly full. Lupin was bending over something on his desk and looked up only when Harry knocked on the door.

"I saw you coming," said Lupin, smiling. He pointed to the parchment he had been poring over. It was the Marauder’s Map.

"I just heard-,” said Harry. "It's not true, is it?"

"I'm afraid it is," said Lupin. He started opening his desk drawers and taking out the contents.

"Why?" said Harry. "You can’t be fired just for being a werewolf, can you?"

Lupin crossed to the door and closed it behind Harry.

"No." He sighed. "This past week was the final straw for Severus. So he -- er -- accidentally let slip that I am a werewolf this morning at breakfast."

"You're not leaving just because of that!" said Harry.

Lupin smiled wryly.

"This time tomorrow, the owls will start arriving from parents.... They will not want a werewolf teaching their children, Harry."

"You're the best Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher we've ever had!" said Harry. "Don't go!"

Lupin shook his head and didn’t speak. He carried on emptying his drawers. Then, while Harry was trying to think of a good argument to make him stay, Lupin said, "It’s not only that. You’ve seen that they’re reconsidering Sirius’s sentence, in the papers?"

Harry nodded.

“They can’t – or at least won’t – admit they were wrong about him. They’ve called off the manhunt, and he’s been offered clemency with time served in exchange for turning in Peter– but he still has to find Peter, and there are a number of other considerations… things Sirius can’t take care of while on
the move. I will be quite busy for quite some time.”

Lupin threw his last few books into his case, closed the desk drawers, and turned to look at Harry. He hesitated, then held out the Marauder's Map too. "I am no longer your teacher, so I don't feel guilty about giving you back this as well. It's no use to me, and I daresay you, Ron, and Hermione will find uses for it."

Harry took the map and grinned.

"You told me Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs would've wanted to lure me out of school... you said they'd have thought it was funny."

"And so we would have," said Lupin, now reaching down to close his case. "I have no hesitation in saying that James would have been highly disappointed if his son had never found any of the secret passages out of the castle."

There was a knock on the door. Harry hastily stuffed the Marauder's Map into his pocket.

It was Professor Dumbledore. He didn't look surprised to see Harry there.

"Your carriage is at the gates, Remus," he said.

"Thank you, Headmaster."

Lupin picked up his old suitcase and the empty Grindylow tank.

"Well -- good-bye, Harry," he said, smiling. "It has been a real pleasure teaching you. I feel sure we'll meet again sometime. Headmaster, there is no need to see me to the gates, I can manage.... Harry, walk with me?"

Harry had the impression that Lupin wanted to leave as quickly as possible.

"Good-bye, then, Remus," said Dumbledore soberly. Lupin shifted the Grindylow tank slightly so that he and Dumbledore could shake hands.

“I had one last thing to talk to you about,” Lupin explained as Harry walked glumly next to him down towards the gates.

“Yes, Professor?"

“I think you can call me Remus, since I'm no longer your professor. You see, Sirius was your godfather – he would have been your guardian, if things had been different... under the circumstances, he was hoping it'd be alright if he wrote, sometimes? Or perhaps visited? I told him not to pressure you-“

“That would be great,” Harry interrupted firmly.

#

“I hate you."

“This is not news to me, Harry Potter. The school year is over, which means three blissful months of me not being responsible for your welfare. Get out of my classroom.”
“You got Professor Lupin fired! He’s the only good Defense professor we’ve ever *had.*”

Snape turned in a swirl of robes.

“He had information that could have led to the capture of Black throughout the year and failed to report it. He admitted to it. Criminal carelessness is grounds for being dismissed.”

Harry froze, then gritted his jaw.

“That isn’t why you did it! You did it because you hate him!”

“Yes, I do. And you may feel free to take his side, and I shall feel free to hate him, but that does not mean I did not have compelling reasons. Child.”

Harry glared at him, panting for breath, wishing that he had any expectation that he could curse his professor and live to tell the tale without being expelled.

“I want to learn to make the Wolfsbane Potion,” he said, trying to keep his tone even. “Please.”

Snape snorted.

“You are at least five to ten years from the expertise to make Wolfsbane, if you ever will be.”

“Then give me a potion simpler but similar that I can learn, and let me memorize the recipe for Wolfsbane for later.”

Snape eyed him, eyes still bright with rage, before nodding sharply.

“In exchange, Mister Potter, we will not speak of Remus Lupin again.”

“Fine.”

Snape handed him a couple sheets of parchment, after writing down two recipes neatly from memory. (Sometimes Harry hated him for more than one reason.)

“I will see you when term begins in September, Mister Potter.”

“Bye, professor.”

It occurred to Harry on the train that Professor Snape had called him Harry, somewhere in the middle of them yelling at each other at the top of their lungs.

#

"I'll call about the World Cup!" Ron yelled after Harry as Harry bid him and Hermione good-bye, then wheeled the trolley bearing his trunk and Hedwig's cage toward Uncle Vernon, who greeted him in his usual fashion.

"What's that?" he snarled, staring at the envelope Harry was still clutching in his hand. "If it's another form for me to sign, you've got another --"

"It's not," said Harry cheerfully. "It's a letter from my godfather."

"Godfather?" sputtered Uncle Vernon. "You haven't got a godfather!"
"Yes, I have," said Harry brightly. "He was my mum and dad’s best friend. He’s a convicted murderer, but he's broken out of wizard prison and he's on the run. He likes to keep in touch with me, though ... keep up with my news ... check if I’m happy ..."

And, grinning broadly at the look of horror on Uncle Vernon’s face, Harry set off toward the station exit, Hedwig rattling along in front of him, for what looked like a much better summer than the last.
It was evening, a few weeks into the summer at Privet Drive, and Harry was almost asleep when someone knocked on his window.

Harry’s room was on the second floor, so he fumbled for his glasses and had the window open, saying, “Hedwig, I just let you out,” before he blinked the world into focus and saw Sirius Black in his window.

Harry’s mouth dropped open.

“Coming out, Harry?” Black asked, as if this was a completely normal thing to do.

“You. How?”

“Got my hands on a wand now, haven’t I? Bit hush-hush, don’t tell anyone that part. Simple levitation charm – but I’d suggest you use your Firebolt.”

“Okay, Mister Black.”

“Sirius, please. You make me sound so old.”

Harry refrained from pointing out that Sirius was his dad’s age, and shortly they were both on the ground in the tidy back garden of Privet Drive. It was incredibly surreal. Sirius was standing on Aunt Petunia’s prize begonias.

“Let’s sit by the hedge,” Harry suggested, eyeing the crushed begonias warily. He knew that would actually be his fault in the morning, and for once it would.

“This is a great hedge,” Sirius commented. “It’d be very cozy.”

“…cozy?”

“Oh, didn’t Remus tell you? I’m an animagus, too.”

“Not – Grim?”

Sirius grinned whitely.

“Great name, by the way. I’m keeping it.”

Harry hugged him firmly. He’d missed Grim, and felt rather guilty about not doing more for the bedraggled stray dog. After a slight pause, Sirius hugged him back.

They settled down, leaning against the hedge, looking up at the crystal-clear night sky.

“Remus said he’d mentioned me being your guardian. You know that would mean leaving this behind, once I’ve gotten things sorted out? If you wanted.”

“Of course I want to come live with you! Do you have a house?”

Sirius laughed, startled.

“I do, actually. It’s ruddy awful, what with me being in Azkaban since… well. It’s filthy. Full of
dark magic, too. Mad portraits, mad house elf… but it still has a roof and wards, which is something, I suppose.” Sirius gave him a shy glance. “It’s at number 12 Grimmauld Place, in London, if you ever need someplace to go. There’s tons of rooms for you to choose from, and Kreacher will take care of food and things.” Sirius waved a vague hand. “Never hurts to have a hideout, does it?”

Harry settled down more comfortably next to him, eyeing the twinkling velvety stars overhead.

“Tell me more about the hunt for Pettigrew. I – I could come with you, if it would help.”

“…no, Harry, you should go to Hogwarts. I don’t know how long it will take, and they might get a little shirty about me kidnapping the ‘Boy Who Lived.’ I hear he’s been sighted on the Continent, that’s why I stopped by before I had to leave the country…. Might be better if you didn’t mention me visiting, either, at least until everything’s sorted out. Who knew being innocent involved so much more paperwork than being guilty?”

“I don’t see why this didn’t come out at the trial.”

“Well, I was a little mad, wasn’t I. And anyone Dumbledore said was on the bad side in those days…..” Sirius ruffled his hair. “It’s good you’re not growing up in a war, Harry.”

Harry thought about fighting Voldemort at eleven and didn’t comment.

“Why did Dumbledore think you were the secret keeper?”

“We told him so. Not the first time James and I outsmarted ourselves.” There was nothing but grim depression in Sirius’ voice.

“…so, what’s your favorite part about being free again?” Harry asked gamely, reaching back for that fragile peace and burgeoning hope he’d been feeling.

Sirius seemed to consider this for a long while.

“Sausages.”

“Sausages?”

“Akzaban has a way of tainting good memories, even the ones you hold onto. Maybe especially the ones you hold onto. I could be a dog, and the dog had an easier time of it, but it still wasn’t… good. Anyway, the nice thing about a sausage is, it’s always just a sausage. It’s hard to feel anything bad about one of those.”

“Oh!” Harry rummaged in his pocket, and offered Sirius a small bag of candies. “Calming Chocolates. They’re a little work in progress, but they don’t make you manic anymore.”

“You named something that made people manic Calming Chocolates?” there was a smile in Sirius’s voice as he accepted the bag and tucked it away somewhere, by the sound of it.

“I’m not too worried about the name. Anyway, right now they’re not very calming but they’re definitely chocolate. If you like chocolate?”

“Hm. Can’t remember, actually.”

Harry filed that under ‘disturbing, think about later.’

Sirius continued after a second, “You keep chocolates in your pajamas pocket?”
“Just in case I run into Dudley and have to bribe him. Aunt Vernon and Uncle Petunia are trying to put him on a diet against his will.”

“Which makes him very susceptible to bribery?”

“He’s being incredibly helpful so far this summer.”

“It’s alright, staying with them?”

“Of course it is,” Harry says sturdily. “We have to get you sorted out and Pettigrew in prison, don’t we? They’re fine until then.”

“So. Want to tell me about winning the Quidditch Cup?”

Harry really, really did.

The lovely thing about summer was that Harry could stay up until dawn talking to his godfather about anything and everything that came to mind – stories about pranks his father had played, stories about Professor Lupin, Ron teaching him wizard chess and Hermione brewing polyjuice in her second year.

“I hear you get along very well with Professor Snape,” Sirius said.

Harry yawned.

“Well, sort of. I really like Potions, and he teaches Potions… he really hates dad, still.”

“I certainly didn’t think he’d stop. No one held a grudge like ol’ Severus…. Probably best I don’t insult him around you, hm?”

“Ron insults him all the time. He insults me all the time… calls me an idiot about potions and things.”

“Why anyone let him be a teacher,” Sirius muttered.

“Oh, he says Dumbledore likes hopeless cases. Because he’s a soft touch, basically.”

Sirius laughed, and Harry grabbed his arm.

“I don’t want you waking up Uncle Vernon. He’s-“ how to put it. “Tetchy before he has his morning tea.”

And after. And during.

“Sorry,” Sirius said more quietly. “I suppose I can see someone hiring Sn- Snape because they felt sorry for him.”

“What did you think of him, at school?”

“Well… we all had it out for each other, really. He had this theory that we were hiding something and breaking the school rules all the time, and he lived to get people in trouble… and he was a baby Death Eater, of course.”

Harry felt very chilly, all of a sudden.

“So I hated him, because he wanted to get us all expelled, and he hated James because James was popular, and – it’s hard to summarize, really.”
“…I asked him this year why he hated Professor Lupin, and he didn’t answer.”

“That’d be my fault.”

“Your fault?”

“I was sixteen, trying to protect my friend, and a bit of an idiot. I played it off as a joke, later. Not a happy memory, which is why Azkaban let me keep it….”

“What happened?”

“He’d been trying to figure out what was up with Remus – what Remus was hiding. And Remus was hiding because he’d be kicked out of school, and no one was doing anything about it… I thought if Snape just went away, got himself into trouble, the problem would go away… he’d been asking for trouble anyway.”

Harry couldn’t think of a thing to say to that, horrified into silence.

“Remus wouldn’t speak to me for three months afterwards. James stopped me, but he understood. We were all a little obsessed with protecting Remus at the time, though I don’t think he knew how much. Peter just liked being in on the secret, I think….”

“You’re going to catch him, aren’t you?” Harry asked, grateful for the subject change, and yawned again.

“Absolutely. Am I keeping you up?”

“I don’t mind.”

“Well… how about I quiz you on your Astronomy? Very important for night flying.”

“Night flying?”

“You’ve never gone out at night to fly? What are they teaching in Hogwarts these days. I miss my motorcycle, I really do….”

“I had a dream about a flying motorbike, once,” Harry said shyly.

“Would you look at that. You remember all the way to back then?” Sirius wrapped an arm around his shoulders. “We’re going to get along just fine, huh Harry?”

“Absolutely.”

Sirius went first, pointing out the Dog Star, and then Harry took a turn pointing to the different stars you could use for navigation, and then Sirius was telling a story about how he’d vowed as a kid to give his children the most boring names imaginable.

"My brother was named Regulus and I insisted on calling him Reg. He hated that...."

Harry fell asleep, between one sentence and another.
“Dudley,” Harry said, not looking up from his trimming the hedge.

His cousin paused, idly, on his way down the street on the other side of the hedge.

“Think you could cover for me going away for a few days? Say you just saw me and I was going out to the park, that sort of thing?”

Dudley grunted neutrally.

“I left a three layer lemon cake in your room,” Harry told the hedge. “With strawberries on top.”

“Not chocolate?” Dudley asked thin air.

“I could make a chocolate one when I got back. If you covered for me.”

“I want four layers of chocolate cake. With chocolate frosting.”

It was nice to know that some things in Harry’s life would never change.

“If you really distract them – tell them you told me to eat in my room because I was distracting you or something….”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” Dudley told Harry reflexively, and both of them went quiet as they considered how to recover from this conversational death trap.

“I want some more of those blue things as well,” Dudley said.

“You like the Sour Raspberries?”

The little blue candies had been Harry’s effort to get Dudley to stop stealing his experiments, by making the most tongue-destroying sour candy possible. The idea of Dudley trying one of the ones with magical effects, and the effect that would have on his fragile summer peace had been rather motivating for Harry.

Sensing rebellion in the colonies, Dudley pounced, “A whole bag, or no deal.”

“Fine.” Heaven forbid Harry stop his cousin from torturing himself. Maybe they’d been a better idea than he thought? “I’m leaving tonight.”

“Where’re you going?”

“London.”

“Why?”

Harry ignored this question, and eventually he heard Dudley wandering off muttering insults under his breath.

#

Harry’d been thinking about this plan for weeks, ever since his night’s conversation with Sirius. Exchanging letters with his friends was all very well, but he’d been hoping to spend more of his
summer with Ron, and there’d been no definite word about that. It left him feeling restless, and returning over and over in his mind to Sirius’ words – whenever you need someplace to escape. 12 Grimmauld Place, London. Choose your own room.

It wasn’t as if he was turning up without an invitation. He had an invitation. And he was curious, and on clear nights with bright stars, Harry looked out his window and thought about star navigation and really flying the way he hadn’t dared on any previous summer. He thought about his flying car adventure with Ron, and tucked away a bottle of water for the trip, eyeing his things and trying to figure out what would be really necessary and what wasn’t – his cauldron didn’t make the cut based on weight, even if he wanted it. Maybe Sirius’s house would have some? A couple robes and some other clothes, a map of the country with a neat line drawn from Little Whinging to London, *Quidditch Through The Ages*, his wand… at which point his bag was full and Harry spent far too long brooding over the rest of his books and the frugality that had kept him from buying a bag with a bigger inside than its outside. It would have been just like Doctor Who, and he could have brought his cauldron and his books, but no, it wasn’t recommended for students. Hmph.

Honestly, it’d just mean he lost things more often.

He’d borrowed one of Uncle Vernon’s padlocks to lock his room from the inside, he’d locked his trunk and put everything really important like his letters in the hidden space under the bed, he’d explained where they were going to Hedwig – was there anything else? He didn’t think so.…. 

It was right before he climbed out the window that Harry paused, hit himself in the forehead, and hurriedly got his invisibility cloak out from under the bed and draped it haphazardly over himself, his bag, and his broom. Much better. It’d be hell on his wind resistance, but he wouldn’t get in trouble for violating the Statute of Secrecy again.

Harry took off into the clear night sky, set the North Star over his shoulder, sighted his reference points, and pushed his Firebolt into headlong, exhilarating flight.

#

Harry found London alright by broomstick, but finding Grimmauld Place proved trickier. In the end he dismounted, bundled his broomstick in his invisibility cloak, and asked the nearest Muggle, blearily exhausted in the early dawn light. A short sob story about getting lost on his way to his uncle’s house later, where his uncle was expecting him, and Harry was the startled recipient of ten pounds and help hailing a cab. The cab driver was very nice too, and Harry was left with the disturbing impression that most people were not like the Dursleys, and he’d just been helped by a complete stranger who’d never heard of his scar for the first time in his life.

Harry had been a remarkably invisible child, even before he’d been the proud owner of an invisibility cloak.

He took a deep breath and knocked on the door of Number 12.

An awful-looking House Elf opened the door, said, “The Master is not at home,” and slammed the door in his face.

Harry thought about this.

Harry knocked again.

The House Elf opened the door, and began again, “The Master is not—“

“He said I could come stay,” Harry interrupted. “Sirius did.”
The House Elf slammed the door in his face again.

Harry knocked on the door.

The House Elf opened the door. Harry was beginning to be amused.

“I’m his godson, Harry Potter. It’s very nice to meet you.”

“Kreacher is not happy to meet you. Kreacher thinks blood traitors are disgusting. Awful friends, young Sirius had.”

“He has awful friends. He’s out of prison, you know.”

Kreacher’s ears perked up.

“The awful child can come in,” Kreacher informed him, and Harry ducked inside, hiding his smile.

“If it tells Kreacher about Master Sirius.”

“Sirius said I could pick my own room. Are rooms upstairs?”

“It will not be Kreacher’s fault if the awful child dies,” Kreacher told him with gleeful malice, and disappeared.

Well, Sirius had said the House Elf was mad. Harry looked around the entrance hallway with interest. Everything was incredibly dirty, which didn’t seem like a House Elf at all – but maybe it was a sign of madness in House Elves. Harry had the intensely pleasant thought that he could leave all this mess exactly where it was and no one was there to yell at him.

This had been an excellent idea.

Since Sirius had said the whole place was full of dark magic and things, Harry decided the best course of action was to not touch anything. He had to touch the doorknobs to open the doors upstairs, but that was all, and aside from one nasty moment with an enchanted carpet, nothing tried to kill Harry at all. He peered into each room in turn, fascinated and disgusted by turns. There was so much stuff, weird objects in cabinets and junk on tables and ghastly old furniture, all covered in thick layers of dust, cobwebs, and grime. He left clear footprints in the hallway dust. There were beds in quite a lot of the upstairs rooms, but it was hard to choose which to use and harder to stop exploring. Harry was so curious.

Harry reached out for a doorknob shaped like a cobra, and Kreacher popped into existence. Harry stifled a yelp.

“The awful child will not go into Master Regulus’s room,” Kreacher said threateningly.

Considering what Dobby could do when he was upset….  

“Sirius said you were to make sure there was food and things,” Harry said, to change the subject. “While I’m here.”

“If the Master wanted Kreacher to take care of the house, the Master should tell Kreacher so.”

That, Harry thought with continued amusement, was definitely sulking. He thought about the Dark wizards he’d met.

“He has to go kill someone,” Harry told Kreacher with his best serious expression. “He’s very focused on that right now, the killing.”
Kreacher’s ears appeared to indicate this was a reasonably respectable thing for his master to be doing.

“I’m sure he’ll be back to boss you around just as soon as he’s done with the killing,” Harry added, ad libbing madly. “He’ll yell at you a lot about the state of the house and order you to weed the garden.”

That was definitely veiled hope in Kreacher’s eyes.

“He is not fit to set foot in Mistress’ house.”

“Mistress?”

“…Mistress will decide about the awful child. The awful child will follow Kreacher.”

Harry followed Kreacher, distracted from who the mysterious Mistress was by wondering how quickly he could talk the House Elf into doing something about breakfast. Harry was hungry.

Kreacher ushered Harry in front of a tremendous portrait of a woman who reminded Harry strongly of both Sirius and Draco Malfoy.

Harry was immediately suspicious.

“Trespassers! Thieves! Evict him, Kreacher!” yelled the portrait.

“I’m Harry Potter, Sirius’s godson,” Harry said, raising his voice though not as much as she did.

“Children should be seen and not heard,” the portrait said, as if it hadn’t been yelling at the top of its lungs a few moments ago. Portraits were weird.

“Yes, ma’am,” Harry said, on the theory that he should play nice with one of Sirius’ relatives. (A mad one? Sirius had mentioned mad portraits.)

“You’re that James Potter’s boy,” she said, giving him the evil eye.

“Yes, ma’am, except he’s dead.”

“Good riddance. And Sirius?”

“Oh. He’s not in Azkaban anymore, because they realized he hadn’t murdered all those people.”

“He never had the stomach for any real magic,” was the portrait’s creepy comment. “Why are you here, boy?”

“Sirius said I could stay here, since he’s my guardian now,” Harry said, keeping his expression innocent.

“As if he was welcome in the home of my father! Why, when I have a chance to have a word with that boy-”

Harry thought very quickly about his Aunt Petunia.

“Would you like to dictate a letter? I could send it to him by owl so he knows all about how you feel about things,” Harry said.

“Kreacher!” the portrait yelled abruptly. “Quill and parchment for the Potter boy.”
“And breakfast,” Harry added quickly. “Lots of breakfast.”

Which is how Harry ended up taking down a long letter while trying not to listen to a word of it, getting a lecture on manners all the while, and then another lecture on table manners while he ate his breakfast and listened agreeably to the portrait insult his hair, his parentage, Sirius, and his glasses.

This place, Harry thought firmly, was really quite homey. And Kreacher, whatever his issues, cooked a mean poached egg on toast.

(“Take this letter to the ocean and drop it in, alright Hedwig?” Harry whispered to his owl in Sirius’ very creepy back garden. “Good luck.”

Then he darted back inside, because he didn’t think it would be polite to set Sirius’ interesting collection of deadly magical plants on fire and one of them was reaching for him.)

#

After posting his letter, Harry was roped into standing without fidgeting and reciting his heritage for a portrait for an hour or so, and then having his Potter heritage recited for him. This came along with another lecture on manners. Harry nodded at the right moments, and actually did think his great-grandfather marrying a Black was interesting – he was sort of related to Sirius and Draco?

Asking about Draco Malfoy had been a mistake, as it turned out, because then the portrait wanted to know all about Draco and who his friends were at school and Harry decided it was time to duck out with a, “I have to tell Kreacher to do chores!”

Harry had a feeling he was only being tolerated as a source of wizard gossip, and he wanted to dole it out as slowly as possible to avoid having to hex his godfather’s house elf or his godfather’s house. He wasn’t quite sure if Sirius would miss his awful maternal portrait, even though Harry couldn’t see why he would miss her.

Harry ended up getting into rather a staring contest with Kreacher over his choice of bedrooms, which Kreacher had made for him with an explanation of rules that Harry fundamentally didn’t care about, though he did gather it was relatively close to Sirius’s old room and the library.

Kreacher’s unsubtle urging to explore the library Harry took as indication that the library would try to kill him, and Harry decided to skip it today.

“Is there someplace I can do laundry?” he asked Kreacher. “The sheets need to be changed.”

“The kitchen is where laundry is done,” Kreacher said.

“Can I see the kitchen?”

“No.”

Well, that was helpful. Harry, who was having a tremendously good day, decided that the only appropriate solution was to explore. Hopefully by the time he found the kitchen it would be lunch time.

Harry found the kitchen by very late lunch time, tired, dirty, and with a nasty cut on his hand from a doorknob that had bitten him when he tried to close the door behind him.

“Hullo, Kreacher,” Harry said agreeably to the House Elf, who was doing something with an oven. “What’s for lunch?”
“Lunch is roast beef, treacle pudding, and potatoes. In the dining room, where civilized wizards eat.”

“Right.” Harry tiredly waved the sink into divulging water and washed his hand clear of blood and dirt. “Is there a faster way to get to the dining room from here?”

“The Potter boy will follow Kreacher,” Kreacher muttered, and Harry found himself going up a spiral staircase that he could swear hadn’t been there before. Oh, well. He’d admit to being pretty turned around. He pulled a red candy out of his pocket and crunched it thoughtfully as he followed Kreacher, studying its effect on his hand. The bleeding definitely stopped, but why the candy had to taste like blood he didn’t know. He’d used cherry flavor, it just didn’t seem to stick.

It turned out that in order to qualify to eat lunch in the Black dining room, you had to look like a wizard, which mostly involved having a quick wash-up and putting a robe on over his things. It made Harry feel more like himself, anyway. Probably best to mention that he hadn’t been through three whole years of Hogwarts just to start care about ‘proper wizarding manners’ now. Ron didn’t use proper wizarding manners, and he was the best wizard Harry knew. In a soul way, not in a doing magic way, obviously.

Harry thought about Ron as he ate his roast beef and tried to calculate the likelihood of Kreacher poisoning him.

“Say, Kreacher, is there a Potions lab somewhere?”

“There is. It is on the third floor, above the library.”

Well, that was… suspiciously helpful, actually.

“Is it likely to try to kill me if I go in there?”

“The potions lab will not try to kill you.”

Harry eyed him.

“Will things in the potions lab try to kill me?”

“The potions lab is a very safe place.”

Harry was really lucky Kreacher was a terrible liar. When Harry appeared to be unlikely to jump out of his chair and rush up to the potions lab to die conveniently, Kreacher disappeared with a sullen pop.

#

Harry thought about inviting his friends over to help explore, but then Ron’s parents would know Harry was out and about without adult supervision (unless the portrait counted, which it probably didn’t). They were great parents, but they seemed to have a Dursley-shaped blind spot that Harry didn’t really want to poke with a stick. He almost wrote a letter to Hermione writing her to come over, but a brief aside with Kreacher about who he was writing to led to a screaming lecture about mudbloods, and Harry considered exposing Hermione to that and decided best not. Instead, hecornered Kreacher into confirming the anti-Muggle attention wards were still working, and jumped out his window on the second floor to fly his broomstick around the roof and above the back garden in narrow spirals, swooping just above the killer vegetation and narrowly avoiding projectile seeds.

He came inside for dinner, fell into a bed with freshly laundered sheets in a still incredibly dusty room, and slept like the dead.
Harry had only meant to stay a few days, perhaps the whole weekend at most. It was just that there was always something new to do, and the thought of the long flight back to the Dursleys did not fill him with joy. The weather wasn’t quite right, either, a succession of cloudy nights that would make navigating his way tricky. Especially once he figured out that when he was wearing the invisibility cloak the Black portraits had a lot less opinions about him, it was just – fantastic. Like the way he’d felt about Hogwarts during the first year, everything new and different and a little dangerous.

The third day at Number 12, Harry talked Kreacher into showing him which room was Sirius’, which was a little pushy but paid off in a big way, because Sirius hadn’t cursed every book he owned, and he had all the Hogwarts textbooks still on a shelf. Harry spent two whole days lying in bed reading about Quidditch history and daydreaming about fighting his way upstairs heroically to conquer the Potions lab and claim it as his own and not cleaning.

On his fourth day at Number 12, Harry had to threaten Kreacher into letting him use the kitchen, and that made life, well, interesting. Kreacher had quite the vocabulary.

Harry boiled sugar and added peppermint extract and twisted candy with practiced motions, and had a fresh bag of candies to keep in his pocket by the end of the afternoon. There was just something reassuring about having food in his pocket and tucked into his bag.

The next two days were a little tricky, because Kreacher was both on strike and trying to kill him ‘by accident,’ which mostly involved levitating furniture and Harry having to cook his own meals. It was great dodging practice, though Harry wished he could have used magic, and Kreacher seemed hampered by an unwillingness to directly murder his master’s guest. So far Harry quite liked Kreacher, but Kreacher did not seem to share the same feelings for him.

On the seventh day, Harry decided to explore the Potions lab, having poked around the library in previous days and not died horribly.

The black stone on the counter had just looked so interesting, somehow. He’d just picked it up to look at it, and then he’d decided he was rather tired and should sit down. He studied the even black stone. The way it caught the summer’s light filtering in through the dust of the windows was just fantastic. It made him… very sleepy….
“Mister Potter. Potter.”

What was Professor Snape doing here? This wasn’t his house. This was Sirius’ house.

That was muffled cursing, and then a series of spells Harry didn’t recognize. And then more cursing. He didn’t know Professor Snape knew those words.

“Open your hand, Potter.”

“It’s mine.”

“Idiot boy,” his professor snarled. “Do as you’re told.”

Three years of habit made Harry open his hand. The stone was levitated out of sight, and then white-blue light splashed against Harry’s chest.

“Do you have any of those ridiculous candies of yours, Potter?” his professor asked, sounding harried. Why was he sounding like Harry was making a runny Congealing Solution?

“I’ve got some of the cherry ones. Except they taste like blood.”

“Remind me what they do.”

“Minor healing, from second year,” Harry said muzzily.

His professor ruffled through his pockets and poured a handful of candy into Harry’s palm.

“Eat.”

“But they taste like blood.”

“Potter.”

Harry decided that dealing with Snape’s angry voice was not worth the argument. He munched dutifully on his handful of candy.

“These taste awful,” he told Snape earnestly. “Hermione’s parents are going to be mad at me. They’re dentists, you know.”

“I did not know. Tell me more about them.”

“They’re very nice, and they buy her lots of books. Not too many books. What are you doing?”

“Dealing with the safeguards here so that I can prepare something to save your life, you absolute blithering moron. How long have you been sitting there?”

“I don’t know. Is it still Saturday?”

“It is Friday,” Snape said tightly. “Your magic must have assisted you in not dying of thirst.”
Come to think of it, Harry was pretty thirsty.

“Am I sick? I could use some water….”

A few moments later, a small cauldron of water was put into his hands. They shook a little as Harry drank.

“I feel a little funny.”

“That is because you are in the process of dying. When the headmaster called me-“

“Dumbledore knew I was in trouble?”

“Oh, no, Dumbledore knew you would be in trouble, because you had run away from home. Again, apparently. I was sent to fetch you before you did irreparable harm to – and then this. Tell me, what did you think you were doing?”

“Sirius said I could,” Harry said stubbornly. He didn’t need to be yelled at. It wasn’t fair.

“I expected nothing better of him, but I had moderately higher expectations of you, Potter.”

“Why’re you so nasty all the time?”

“…talk, Potter. I need to know you are awake and coherent. Your magic will keep working as long as you are awake to let it work.”

“Okay. I think it was probably Kreacher’s fault. He knew I wanted to come into the Potions lab, and he was really angry with me for using his kitchen and existing in his house. He set a Boggart on me and a couple other things, but I knew how to deal with them from class….”

“Very good, Harry. Keep talking.”

Snape was making interesting noises behind the bench Harry was leaning against.

“Are you making a potion? Can I watch?”

“Stay where you are. Leech stones are very black magic, and I do not know – you say last you knew it was Sunday?”

“That’s right. I didn’t mean to stay so long, but the weather wasn’t right for flying….”

“Sirius Black.”

“If you murder him, I’m never speaking to you again.”

“If I murder him. If.”

“No murders,” Harry said firmly. “Even if they would make you feel better.”

“Sometimes, boy, I truly pity you.”

“But most of the time you don’t. I like that.”

“If I murdered Sirius Black, I would go to Azkaban. He is safe from me. How you get into this much trouble- drink this, boy.”

Harry obediently drank the steaming green potion, which burned all the way down and left him
coughing and wheezing and breathing, aware suddenly of just how strange and grey the world had been.

“Come.” Snape offered Harry a hand and Harry stood, swaying. “You are not spending another night in this house.”

“I like this house,” Harry muttered, but more quietly. He was aware, suddenly, of just how strange he must have sounded.

Under Snape’s watchful eyes, Harry collected his things from his room, patted his bed sadly.

“Take my hand. We’ll apparate to Diagon Alley, and deal with your relatives in the morning.”

“If we’re going back to the Dursleys in the morning, why can’t I-“

“Not another word,” Snape breathed. “You do not know how close you came to dying, in more than one way, and I will not have you doing so until I have had time to impress on you the full stupidity of your actions.”

Harry really wished Dumbledore had sent someone else. Anyone else.

And why was Dumbledore sending people to keep track of him in the summer, anyway?

With a crack they apparated to Diagon Alley.

#

They ate dinner in silence at the Leaky Cauldron, and then Harry fell into bed in a rented room. He’d remembered midway through dinner that he was still absolutely furious with Professor Snape for a few different reasons, which made it all very awkward.

“I will pick you up in the morning,” Snape said stiffly, and left him there to fend for himself. Typical.

#

Having breakfast with Professor Snape was even more awkward than dinner had been. Harry’s little rented sitting room was nice and everything, but it was still…. Harry watched his teacher sip tea and decided to venture, “So, why were you there yesterday, anyway? I didn’t tell anyone where I was.”

“I shall give you the explanation as it was given to me,” Professor Snape said evenly, setting his teacup down with a click. “Upon your mother’s death certain protections were put in place. Those protections are tied to her blood family, your aunt and your cousin. This week you almost broke them, by abandoning your blood relatives and calling another house home. If Dumbledore did not monitor the situation, you would be dead twice over.”

“No one ever said,” Harry said numbly, the implications only beginning to come clear. His toast sat leaden in his stomach. “So I can’t leave? Really?”

“Blood is blood. It was explained to your aunt and assumed she would pass it along to you at the appropriate age.”

“…the headmaster did say I was protected, but he didn’t say exactly why or how. Years ago.”

“Headmaster Dumbledore seldom says things without a good reason, no matter how arcane his reason may be. I would pay close attention to what he has said and not said.”
Harry thought about an odd comment about socks, and a gentle explanation that he could talk to snakes because he was connected to Voldemort.

“Did I ever tell you his theory about why I’m a parselmouth?” Harry asked, because it seemed like a good idea to change the subject before he started shouting. “He said it was because Voldemort and I had a magical connection.”

Snape looked pained.

“At another time, remind me to explain to you about the taboo. Now, tell me you understand how close you came to dying, and why you cannot simply avoid your relatives.”

Harry frowned at the table.

“Thanks for saving me and everything, but – what was that thing?”

“A leech stone. It’s a simple enchantment of fascination, making you interested in the stone to the exclusion of all else, including food, sleep, and escape. It’s meant to trap intruders to be dealt with at the owner’s leisure, mainly.”

Snape was glaring at his tea as if it had done something awful to him.

“You shouldn’t be mad at Sirius for this,” Harry tried. “He just said I could come over anytime, I don’t think he realized I’d do it.”

Professor Snape seemed to have no comment on this crazy idea to not blame Sirius for things. Harry slumped in his chair.

“Come. I have one more unpleasant conversation to have this morning. Your aunt must be reminded that you are her responsibility.”

“…you’re going to talk to my aunt.”

“Yes.”

“Oh. Goodie.”

#

Professor Snape in Muggle clothing was strange not for the usual wizard reasons, but because he actually looked normal, for him. Instead of black robes, he wore a long black coat with lots of buttons and looked, basically, exactly the same as he always did – like he got no sun, took no care of his appearance, and hated you personally. Harry felt very conspicuous trailing after him in his sweatshirt and baggy jeans, invisible broom in one hand and bag over the other shoulder. It turned out there was an apparition point in Little Whinging, but it was a walk from there to Number 4. He just couldn’t visualize Professor Snape and his aunt and uncle in the same room. It didn’t fit, in his head, they were two different worlds and the collision was giving him a preparatory headache.

“I can go on my own,” he assayed.

“No.”

“What are you going to say, though? They don’t really… like magic. You might not want to-“

“Potter.”
Harry paused, and watched Professor Snape weigh what he was going to say.

“I understand being ashamed of one’s relatives. My father.”

Professor Snape seemed to run into a wall, then, as if even saying the word father was too much for him. Harry watched him warily.

“In any case, I have met Petunia before. We will simply be… catching up.”

Harry wondered a little wildly if he could get away with stunning his professor and running. Probably not, he thought morosely.

Professor Snape knocked on his aunt’s door. His aunt opened the door, and paused.


“We don’t want your sort here. You’re not welcome,” she snapped, hovering in the doorway with glittering eyes.

“As one of Mister Potter’s professors, I have a number of concerns to discuss with you,” he said, coming inside quite as if she hadn’t spoken. “We should sit down.”

Aunt Petunia’s eyes focused on Harry.

“Well? Make the tea,” she snapped at him, quite as if he’d never left. Harry rolled his eyes and put his bag down, tucking his carefully invisible broomstick into the corner where no one would trip over it. (He was more worried about the broomstick than his relatives, in that situation.)

Harry busied himself making tea, trying frantically to eavesdrop on the conversation in the living room with no success. By the time he’d gotten in there, the pleasantries seemed to be over.

“I don’t see how it’s your concern how I raise my nephew,” Aunt Petunia was saying hotly. “I’ve done as best as I know how, and he doesn’t want much looking after.”

“He is fourteen, and still requires some modicum of adult supervision. Surely you noticed he was no longer under your roof?”

“I thought he was sulking.”

“I see,” Professor Snape said silkily.

“Why’re you the one coming around asking questions, then? Lily told me about you.”

Harry turned to look at his professor, who had gone rather still.

“She said you’d gone quite wrong,” his aunt continued with relish. “Started stalking her and everything, joined a gang, to tell her if you ever came around so she could tell you to knock it off. I was certain you’d end up in prison.”

“My criminal record is not the topic of discussion today, Petunia. Nor is Lily.”

“Why else would you take an interest in the boy?”

“You cannot imagine why someone would take an interest in Harry?”

“I’ve always said he’d come to a bad end, just like his parents.”
A teapot on the mantelpiece exploded.

“I’ll just… clean that up….” Harry said weakly.

“Reparo,” Snape said, with a flick of his wand, and the teapot reassembled itself and levitated back to the mantelpiece.

Aunt Petunia fainted.

“Erm.” Harry patted her hand, and once she’d swum back to consciousness, handed her a cup of tea, which she clutched. “Where’s Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia?”

“At work.” She glared tearfully at Snape over her teacup. “He said your sort weren’t allowed to come here, in his letter.”

“Ah, but that depends on Harry living here and calling this place home, for some reasonable portion of the year. So try to notice him wandering off, and you’ll never have to see me again.”

“Good,” she said viciously.

Professor Snape took a sip of tea.

“Jealousy,” he observed, “Is very ugly.”

“Me, jealous? What would you know about it, then? Or were you talking about yourself, Sevvy?”

“Merlin, I’d forgotten that particular unfortunate nickname. Professor Snape, if you please, Mrs. Dursley.”

“Was there anything else, Professor Snape? Did you want to harass my son, next?”

She shot a nervous look upstairs, as if worried this would give Snape ideas.

“You knew my mum?” Harry interrupted.

“We were friends, as children,” Snape said distantly.

“Best friends,” Petunia added. “Always going on about how wonderful it would be once you could go away and leave all the rest of us behind, weren’t you, Professor.”

Harry considered this for a few seconds, not even sure where to start. Professor Snape’s face as he said ‘my father.’ His mother’s stalker? Joined a gang? That must be the Death Eaters, but… but….

“I cannot claim to have missed you overly much,” Professor Snape said, dead dry. “The tea is very nice, thank you, Harry.”

Harry was going to die of confusion and misery and go to the happy place in the sky with his parents.

“I’ll put a leash on him. Happy?”

“Ecstatic.” Professor Snape finished his last sip of tea and set the cup down. “I will see you when term begins, Mister Potter.”

“…bye, professor.”
This whole chapter becomes more disturbing when you realize Dumbledore sent Snape on the theory it might sabotage Harry's relationships with Sirius, Snape, or both.
Harry knew, more than almost anything else in his life, that his Aunt Petunia was not a reliable witness. Still, there was usually some vein of truth somewhere in her malicious gossip – his mother may not have died in a car crash, but she also hadn’t turned out to have been living quietly in the Caribbean as a singer, either.

Harry decided to do the mature thing and pretend he hadn’t heard anything, nothing had happened, and he’d never had reason to visualize Severus Snape wanting to date his mother.

Harry hummed very loudly to himself until the mental image went away, and when that didn’t work, he tried banging his head into a pillow. Then he tried smothering himself with the pillow.

Nothing really helped, so he slunk his way out of his room and grabbed pruning shears to massacre the hedge. His aunt very carefully pretended she couldn’t see him, and Harry turned up for meals. At least Uncle Vernon hadn’t noticed he was missing, so that was a bullet dodged.

Snape and his mother no no no. Anything else. Kreacher dancing naked in the rain. Fighting Voldemort! Maybe Voldemort could kill him, that would be grand, he’d really love a horrible fight to the death right now….

After a few days, Harry stopped twitching every time the curtains twitched and eyeing the teapots as if they’d betrayed him, but he still kept very busy for the next month.

So in a way, a vivid dream of Voldemort murdering an old man was a nice change of pace.

In a way.

Now, in another reality Harry had only vague memories of this dream. In this reality, Harry had been attempting to learn Occlumency for almost two years, and had mostly failed except for gaining a habit of lucid dreaming. With that in mind, it was an easy decision to write to Sirius.

Dear Sirius,

Thanks for your last letter. I’ve made peace again with Dudley by sharing a tremendous amount of birthday cake with him, except then Uncle Vernon found out that I was helping Dudley disobey his diet and we had to make ourselves scarce. I wouldn’t call myself friends with Dudley yet, but we’re working on it. He has ideas about Muggle music for you. Apparently ‘classic rock’ is okay but you should listen to new stuff. He’s finally been convinced that you’re alright because I told him you used to have a motorbike, which is very impressive if you’re Dudley. (He wouldn’t fit on a motorbike, but I didn’t tell him that.)

I don’t want to worry you, but I had a dream about Voldemort. It was a little different from my usual nightmares, so here it is: he was sitting and planning with Wormtail, something about doing something involving me, but after the Quidditch World Cup. Then a muggle interrupted and Voldemort killed him and I woke up. They were in an old house – I think maybe in England? And Voldemort talked about murdering a woman named Bertha Jenkins.

Hope all is well and this helps! I sometimes get a sense about him because of my curse scar, but it being a full dream is new….

If you come back to the country, maybe we could go by your house over my school breaks? It would be good practice for my Defense class!
Harry

Harry settled back and studied his letter with satisfaction. Yes, he’d managed to feel like he might be helping Sirius, suggest Sirius come back to the country, and tell an adult about a problem, all in one letter. He was getting good at this dealing with adults thing.

Harry had taken Dudley aside before the Weasleys arrived and tried to reassure him as best he could that it wouldn’t result in any more curses. (Dudley having been the recipient of a pig’s tail last time he encountered a wizard. Which Harry didn’t feel at all bad about, but did try to pretend to regret.)

“Mr. Weasley works for the government,” Harry tried, “So he’d be sacked if he, er, did anything. He mostly does paperwork.”

Which was, of course, a complete lie, but it left Dudley less twitchy, which in turn made Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia a bit less tight around the eyes. Aunt Petunia, in particular, had looked like she’d swallowed extra lemons all summer, ever since Professor Snape had visited, and had actually sat Harry down to make a schedule of chores and meals so that she and Harry could avoid being in the same room for six days out of seven.

“You have a government?”

“Well, sort of. It’s a ministry of the regular government, I think,” Harry said doubtfully, since he’d never really paid attention to how it worked. “They take care of keeping things secret and, er, quiet. Make sure no one bothers the Queen, that sort of thing.”

Dudley gave Harry a gimlet, doubtful stare that suggested he didn’t think wizards cared about things like queens, and also he suspected Harry was growing up to be a serial killer. Harry, who was at this point half convinced that all adult wizards were barking mad, tried to look as if he definitely wasn’t going to grow up to be a serial killer, or at least if he was, it was the sort of serial killer you backed away slowly from and respected in a quiet way, rather than panicking and screaming a lot.

“Right,” said Dudley, and went to find his mother for reassurance they wouldn’t all be murdered or turned into squirrels.

Fred and George testing their new toffees on Dudley, Harry thought later with a sigh, would not actually help him convince Dudley wizards weren’t collectively out to get him.

“You aren’t cross with us, are you Harry?” asked Fred.

“We know he’s your precious test subject,” added George.

“But we needed to try it on someone and we hoped you’d share,” finished Fred.

Since Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were right there, Harry tried to pretend he hadn’t been testing candies on Dudley all year.

Things went well from there. At least Ron and Hermione escaped. Harry felt guiltily pleased that mostly his part of the lecture was Fred and George corrupting him when he was young and innocent.

Ron, a bit later, commented, “It’s eerie seeing you three at it together – your innocent face is just the same as theirs.”
Harry groaned and tried to smother himself with a pillow again, was briefly reminded of why he’d previously been trying to smother himself with a pillow, and asked Ron plaintively, “Is there any way to erase your own memories?”

“Well, there’s memory charms,” Ron said doubtfully. “But they can make you a little odd. Mum didn’t give you that bad a lecture, did she?”

“It’s not that.” Harry hesitated. “I just realized that at some point… at some point… Professor Snape and Professor McGonnegall probably had, you know. Kissed people.”

Ron swiftly developed a thousand-yard stare.

“Mate.”

“Yeah, Ron?”

“Professor Dumbledore probably kissed someone once.”

“…maybe your parents will let us get drunk if you explain,” Harry said faintly.

Ron’s parents did not let them get drunk. Harry was only faintly mollified by conversation over dinner with Bill Weasley about the best identification spells for cursed objects and safe handling practices - hypothetically speaking, of course.
“Sorry about your toffees,” Harry told Fred and George on the walk to the Quidditch Cup, keeping his voice down.

They shrugged in unison, but appeared actually downheartened, because they didn’t immediately pass it off with a joke.

“My Thinking Mints still barely work, my Cherry Healers taste like blood, and my Calming Chocolates… well, those actually work, but they’re basically a less good version of regular Honeydukes chocolate. Dudley did like my Sour Raspberries, but I don’t see why – they’re designed to try to make your tongue fall off. Not literally.”

“Harry makes a good point,” said George.

“Life is suffering,” added Fred.

“And suffering is art,” concluded George.

Which Harry did not quite follow, but they seemed to cheer up.

“We still want to include your candies on the order forms,” Fred added.

“Professor Snape would hang me upside down by my heels and skin me,” Harry said with a frown. “He said I wasn’t allowed to take his lessons and start an apothecary, and I think that includes the candies.”

“Life is easier if you don’t listen to professors,” the twins informed him, and Harry could not actually disagree. But since he didn’t want to agree, either, he drifted back to talk to Ron and Hermione.

#

The Quidditch World Cup was wonderful, but waking in the night to scatter into the woods was not.

The colored lanterns that had lit the path to the stadium had been extinguished. Dark figures were blundering through the trees; children were crying; anxious shouts and panicked voices were reverberating around them in the cold night air. Harry felt himself being pushed hither and thither by people whose faces he could not see. Then he heard Ron yell with pain.

"What happened?" said Hermione anxiously, stopping so abruptly that Harry walked into her. "Ron, where are you? Oh this is stupid - lumos!"

She illuminated her wand and directed its narrow beam across the path. Ron was lying sprawled on the ground.

"Tripped over a tree root," he said angrily, getting to his feet again.

"Well, with feet that size, hard not to," said a drawling voice from behind them.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione turned sharply. Draco Malfoy was standing alone nearby, leaning against a tree, looking utterly relaxed. His arms folded, he seemed to have been watching the scene at the campsite through a gap in the trees.
Ron told Draco to do something that Harry knew he would never have dared say in front of Mrs. Weasley.

"Language, Weasley," said Draco, his pale eyes glittering. "Hadn't you better be hurrying along, now? You wouldn't like her spotted, would you?"

He nodded at Hermione, and at the same moment, a blast like a bomb sounded from the campsite, and a flash of green light momentarily lit the trees around them.

"What's that supposed to mean?" said Hermione defiantly.

"Granger, they're after Muggles," said Draco. "D'you want to be showing off your knickers in midair? Because if you do, hang around....they're moving this way, and it would give us all a laugh."

"Hermione's a witch," Harry snarled.

"You're breaking my heart, Harry."

"Since when do you call him Harry?" asked Ron.

"Since last year sometime," Draco said, flapping a hand.

There came a bang from the other side of the trees that was louder than anything they had heard. Several people nearby screamed. Malfoy chuckled softly.

"Scare easily, don't they?" he said lazily. "I suppose your daddy told you all to hide? What's he up to - trying to rescue the Muggles?"

"Yeah, he is," Harry said shortly. "And I bet I know where your dad is, so stop talking about Ron's."

Draco gave them a cool glance.

"You'll be fine. Run along, hero. Grownups are playing tonight."

"Careful the Ministry doesn't mistake you for one of that lot, Draco," Harry said. "Easy mistake to make."

Draco's eyebrows went up in his pale face, but he made a shooing gesture rather than engage. Harry really didn't have time for him tonight.
"Slave labor," said Hermione, breathing hard through her nose. "That's what made this dinner. Slave labor."

And she refused to eat another bite.

“Sirius has a house elf,” Harry commented, unwilling to tell Hermione he’d known about the Hogwarts kitchens for ages and hadn’t really thought about it. “He runs Sirius’ house in London. He’s, er. Sort of bossy.”

And murderous, but Harry didn’t want to make it sound weird.

“I suppose he doesn’t get paid either,” Hermione said rather dangerously.

“I don’t know about that,” Harry said. “Sirius was busy being in Azkaban, I don’t think he’s had time to talk to Kreacher about his contract, and Sirius’ family was pretty old fashioned.”

“Are you talking about Sirius Black?” asked Neville in an odd sort of voice.

“He’s my godfather,” Harry said, eyeing Neville cautiously. “I went and saw his house this summer. Neville appeared to have nothing to say to this, and Harry was quickly distracted by Ron trying to convince Hermione to eat.

#

They reached the entrance hall, which was packed with people queuing for dinner. They had just joined the end of the line, when a loud voice rang out behind them.

"Weasley! Hey, Weasley!"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione turned. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were standing there, each looking thoroughly pleased about something.

“What?” said Ron shortly.

"Your dad’s in the paper, Weasley!” said Malfoy, brandishing a copy of the Daily Prophet and speaking very loudly, so that everyone in the packed entrance hall could hear. "Listen to this!

FURTHER MISTAKES AT THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC
It seems as though the Ministry of Magic’s troubles are not yet at an end, writes Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent. Recently under fire for its poor crowd control at the Quidditch World Cup, and still unable to account for the disappearance of one of its witches, the Ministry was plunged into fresh embarrassment yesterday by the antics of Arnold Weasley, of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office.” Malfoy looked up.

"Imagine them not even getting his name right, Weasley. It's almost as though he's a complete nonentity, isn't it?” he crowed.

Everyone in the entrance hall was listening now. Malfoy straightened the paper with a flourish and read on:
Arnold Weasley, who was charged with possession of a flying car two years ago, was yesterday involved in a tussle with several Muggle law-keepers ("policemen") over a number of highly aggressive dustbins. Mr. Weasley appears to have rushed to the aid of "Mad-Eye" Moody, the aged ex-Auror who retired from the Ministry when no longer able to tell the difference between a handshake and attempted murder. Unsurprisingly, Mr. Weasley found, upon arrival at Mr. Moody's heavily guarded house, that Mr. Moody had once again raised a false alarm. Mr. Weasley was forced to modify several memories before he could escape from the policemen, but refused to answer Daily Prophet questions about why he had involved the Ministry in such an undignified and potentially embarrassing scene.

"And there's a picture, Weasley!" said Malfoy, flipping the paper over and holding it up. "A picture of your parents outside their house - if you can call it a house! Your mother could do with losing a bit of weight, couldn't she?"

Ron was shaking with fury. Everyone was staring at him.

"That's it," Harry said, sounding distant even from himself. "What did Ron ever do to you, huh? Leave off, Malfoy. Or I'll make you."

"Oh, and how would you do that, Potter?"

"I'm not joking. I am so tired of this game. You just don't like his dad because he wants to put your dad in prison for collecting Dark stuff. Scared, Malfoy?"

Malfoy's pale face went slightly pink.

"Don't you dare talk about my father, Potter."

"Keep your mouth shut, then," said Harry, turning away.

BANG!

Several people screamed - Harry felt something white-hot graze the side of his face - he plunged his hand into his robes for his wand, but before he'd even touched it, he heard a second loud BANG, and a roar that echoed through the entrance hall.

"OH NO YOU DON'T, LADDIE!"

Harry spun around. Professor Moody was limping down the marble staircase. His wand was out and it was pointing right at a pure white ferret, which was shivering on the stone-flagged floor, exactly where Malfoy had been standing.

There was a terrified silence in the entrance hall. Nobody but Moody was moving a muscle. Moody turned to look at Harry - at least, his normal eye was looking at Harry; the other one was pointing into the back of his head.

"Did he get you?" Moody growled. His voice was low and gravelly.

"No," said Harry, "missed."

"LEAVE IT!" Moody shouted.

"Leave - what?" Harry said, bewildered.
"Not you - him!" Moody growled, jerking his thumb over his shoulder at Crabbe, who had just frozen, about to pick up the white ferret. It seemed that Moody's rolling eye was magical and could see out of the back of his head.

Moody started to limp toward Crabbe, Goyle, and the ferret, which gave a terrified squeak and took off, streaking toward the dungeons.

"I don't think so!" roared Moody, pointing his wand at the ferret again - it flew ten feet into the air, fell with a smack to the floor, and then bounced upward once more.

"I don't like people who attack when their opponent's back's turned," growled Moody as the ferret bounced higher and higher, squealing in pain. "Stinking, cowardly, scummy thing to do..."

The ferret flew through the air, its legs and tail flailing helplessly.

"Never - do - that - again -" said Moody, speaking each word as the ferret hit the stone floor and bounced upward again.

"Professor Moody!" said a shocked voice.

Professor McGonagall was coming down the marble staircase with her arms full of books.

"Hello, Professor McGonagall," said Moody calmly, bouncing the ferret still higher.

"What - what are you doing?" said Professor McGonagall, her eyes following the bouncing ferret's progress through the air.

"Teaching," said Moody.

"Teach - Moody, is that a student?" shrieked Professor McGonagall, the books spilling out of her arms.

"Yep," said Moody.

"No!" cried Professor McGonagall, running down the stairs and pulling out her wand.

Then, with an odd look on her face, she paused.

“Mister Malfoy?” she asked, gaze still on the ferret.

“That’s the one,” Moody agreed.

“Mister Malfoy,” Professor McGonagall said, “This is a good opportunity to practice. Concentrate, if you please. Secondary would be easier than primary, I think.”

The ferret form flickered as if it was in a bad old movie, and then it was a small white cat, fur on end, and then it was Draco, panting, lying in a heap on the floor.

"Moody, we never use Transfiguration as a punishment!" said Professor McGonagall wildly. "Surely Professor Dumbledore told you that?"

"He might've mentioned it, yeah," said Moody, scratching his chin unconcernedly, "but I thought a
"good sharp shock -"

"We give detentions, Moody! Or speak to the offender's Head of House!"

"I'll do that, then," said Moody, staring at Malfoy.

“You’re a bit of a surprise, aren’t you,” Moody told Malfoy. It did not sound like a compliment. The rest of the students were whispering – Harry heard Ron asking Hermione if she knew Draco was an animagus.

Malfoy pushed himself to his feet.

“Now, your Head of House'll be Snape, will it?”

"Yes," said Malfoy resentfully.

"Another old friend," growled Moody. "I've been looking forward to a chat with old Snape....Come on, you..."

And he seized Malfoy's upper arm and marched him off toward the dungeons.

Professor McGonagall stared anxiously after them for a few moments, then waved her wand at her fallen books, causing them to soar up into the air and back into her arms.
Draco tried and failed to ignore the nerves thrumming through him as Moody hauled him along towards Snape's office.

“So, if you’re such a hotshot wizard, why’d you hex him in the back, then?” asked Moody abruptly.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Your father always was a cowardly snake. You a coward, boy?”

“I don’t see how it would have been better to hex him when he was looking at me. Professor.”

“Hmph.”

Draco eyed Moody very warily. You heard stories about him. Especially if you had a father like Draco’s father.

“I’m supposed to be your teacher,” Moody said. “And right now all I see is weakness. You have any redeeming qualities, boy?”

What a strange question.

“…I suppose I’m rather loyal, sir.”

The professor hmphed to himself.

“Well. I suppose I’ll just have to work the jumpiness out of you. Teach you to fight people face to face.”

Moody grinned horribly. Draco twitched, and tried to pull away.

“Can’t use transfiguration. Don’t worry – I’m sure I can come up with something else educational.”

For those following along at home, Barty Crouch Jr. has decided Draco has potential. I hope no one thinks this is good. This is very, very bad.
Harry and Professor Snape ignored each other pretty neatly in their first Potions class of the new term, though it seemed unfair to Neville, who didn’t deserve that many toads.

Watching the Unforgiveables in the first Defense class gave Harry the cold horrors, but he was neatly distracted by Divination, S.P.E.W., and a new letter from Sirius:

* Harry -
* I'm flying north immediately. This news about your scar is the latest in a series of strange rumors that have reached me here. If it hurts again, go straight to Dumbledore - they're saying he's got Mad-Eye out of retirement, which means he's reading the signs, even if no one else is. I'll be in touch soon. My best to Ron and Hermione. Keep your eyes open, Harry.
* Sirius

* Harry looked up at Ron and Hermione, who stared back at him. *

"He's flying north?" Hermione whispered. "He's coming back?"

"Dumbledore's reading what signs?" said Ron, looking perplexed. "Harry - what's up?"

“Well,” Harry said, “We’re going to clear out his house of old Dark objects his family left behind, I think. Over the hols.”

“But what’s this about Dumbledore and signs?” Ron asked.

Harry shrugged angrily, and excused himself to bed. To lie awake, because It was better than whatever dreams he’d have.

#

Early next morning, Harry was up before breakfast, and headed directly to the dungeons, Map in hand. Professor Snape wasn’t in his office or classroom yet, but if Harry peered carefully, he found Snape’s little dot a little bit aways from the mass of hard-to-read Slytherin dots. One day he’d cast an Engorgement charm on the Map and actually be able to read the thing.

Snape’s expression when he opened the doors to his rooms and found Harry standing there, hands in his pockets, would later be priceless. Right now, it was just one more thing to get out of the way.

Snape swept past him without a word, and Harry followed. They ended up in Snape’s office, which was fine.

The cup of tea was a surprise, but not entirely unwelcome. Harry slouched into a chair, and Snape sat and sipped his own tea.

“Someone had better be dead,” Snape said.

“Moody demonstrated the killing curse in class yesterday,” Harry said, eyes on his teacup. “And an old muggle man this summer, but that was ages ago.”

“…go on.”
“I know my Aunt Petunia is full of – she tells lies a lot. But I reckon you were sad about mum, because it does explain some things.” Harry ignored the frigid silence. This was a really nice teacup. Blue and white and sort of cute. It must have been a present, Harry couldn’t see Professor Snape buying nice blue and white china.

“We’re not going to talk about my mum,” Harry continued. “But I want someone to know I’ve only got one memory of her, and that’s the one with the killing curse in it. I remember her voice.”

Harry took a meditative sip of tea.

“So I know she loved me a lot.”

Harry ran out of words, at this point, and was startled out of his silence by the sound of paper. He looked up to see a stack of photographs on the table. He put his teacup down and flipped through them slowly.

A muggle-style photograph of a little redheaded girl, laughing in the summer sun with pondweed in her hair.

A teenage redheaded girl, still mostly a child, sitting in the snow outside Hogwarts surrounded by books.

Others, all of his mother, all happy, though a few seemed exasperated with the picture-taker. Not many, but different ones from the ones he’d had. She was younger in these.

“They are copies,” Snape said.

“Want to talk about Voldemort murdering strangers?” Harry said brightly, putting the photos down and picking his teacup back up.

Snape hummed agreeably. For both their sakes, Harry didn’t look at him.

“I’m having visions with him in them. He’s plotting to murder me again.”

“And murdering random muggles. How is your Occlumency progressing, Potter?”

“I’m awful at it. I lose my concentration or I get angry or – Hermione’s best out of the three of us and we’re all pretty terrible. That’s just using it on regular old nightmares, not….”

Snape sighed.

“It could be useful,” Harry opined.

“Right up until he notices it, at which point it will be him having visions of you,” Snape snapped. “Consider, him knowing your every weakness, your every attachment.”

Harry thought about Hermione at the Quidditch World Cup, in more danger than either him or Ron, and wasn’t sure what to say to that.

“Have you informed the headmaster?”

“Well. No.”

“Why not?”

“He usually knows this stuff without me telling him,” Harry muttered defensively. “Anyway, it’s just
Voldemort trying to kill me again. It’s not new."

“If you had a competent Defense teacher, you would be informed that dramatic visions of Dark wizards are very seldom a good sign.”

Harry didn’t argue.

“Very well. You will write down an account for the headmaster.”

“…I don’t think I remember that well now. He was talking to Wormtail, and there was a giant snake, and then an old muggle interrupted and Voldemort killed him. And they wanted to kill me, but slowly somehow.”

“Next time, you will write down an account for the headmaster immediately after having the vision.”

“Yes, professor.”

Harry finished his last swallow of tea in a gulp, and ducked out of the room, pausing only to grab his photographs. He was really very serious about not talking to Professor Snape about his mum.

#

He was feeling quite odd at breakfast, going through his new photos.

“What are those?” asked Ron, and Harry stifled the urge to hide them.

“…new photos. Old friend of my mum’s found them.”

If he didn’t put Professor Snape and his mother in the same sentence, they didn’t exist in the same world. Right? Right.

“Can I see?” asked Hermione, and the photos were dutifully shared around.

“Oh,” Hermione said softly, looking at one of the older muggle photos, “She was like me.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed, not sure what that tone of voice was but certain that if he wasn’t careful a girl thing like crying might happen. “I reckon she was brilliant at classes like you, too. I heard that.”

“They don’t talk about her in the history books as often as they talk about your father,” Hermione commented. “Potter is a magical family name, you know. Like Black.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “I met a portrait this summer you – well. You wouldn’t have gotten along with her, but she liked reciting her family history a lot.”

“Why didn’t you invite us along to explore the house, Harry?” asked Ron. “I would’ve helped.”

“You can come over some other holiday,” Harry said, in sudden inspiration. “You’re always inviting me to your house, it’d be a change.”

He’d always been able to ignore magical ward maintenance all the time except the summer, surely he didn’t have to stay at Hogwarts for holidays anymore.

“What’s it like? Who was the portrait?”

Harry had a most enjoyable breakfast explaining the House of Black to Hermione and Ron and a confused but interested Dean Thomas, who thought it sounded like a horrible death trap. He wasn’t
quite able to convey why it was wonderful in one conversation, but Hermione said brightly that she’d get him some books on curse breaking and dark object identification and surely there was a magical potion he could work on that worked as a magical cleaning product without his wand, so he could use it on breaks if he made it during school?

Harry did catch Hermione and Ron giving each other proud looks sometime during his happy, rambling explanations, but he didn’t quite see why they were so pleased. So he was happy, so what? It wasn’t their job to cheer him up or anything.

Harry’s first twice a week private Potions lesson of the new year was marred by him and Professor Snape not talking to each other. Harry turned up on time, freshly glad about the lessons because they filled some time he’d normally distract himself with Quidditch, and paused and watched his Professor set up a line of ten cauldrons.

“I need that dandelion fluff de-seeded,” Snape said, with a nod towards a mountain of dandelion fluff. “Not one seed, mind.”

Harry scowled, and went to work.

“This will be Dreamless Sleep,” Snape said, after he had struck Harry even more speechless by keeping all ten cauldrons smoothly bubbling their way to completion at the same time, moving between them with the grace of an adder. “Madame Pomfrey keeps it in stock for students with nightmares. I trust her to dispense it sensibly.”

Well, that was an answer to a question Harry hadn’t asked, but he made the mental note anyway.

“I was hoping to work on a cleaning solution. Something I could use during school breaks.”

“Hm. Scrubbing Bubbles.” There was a pause, and Snape offered in a dry voice, “I imagine you will turn it into a candy and sell it with your Weasley conspirators.”

“I wasn’t going to,” Harry said, “And I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Harry eyed his professor very suspiciously at Snape added the next round of ingredients.

“You want me to.”

“The idea that idiot children might pay to scrub their own mouths out with soap appeals to me.”

Harry sighed.

“Which book is Scrubbing Bubbles in?”

Snape handed it to him a few seconds later.

“Read it, write ten inches, and expect to create it successfully during our Saturday session.”

Since Harry wasn’t talking to him, Harry didn’t argue.
“So,” Harry said, sitting down next to Fred and George, “I think I just got Snape’s permission to put my stuff on your order forms, as long as I don’t admit it’s mine and he never has to admit it’s funny.”

The excited chorus was wonderful, and candy that made you foam at the mouth with soap was added to the ‘yes, absolutely’ list.

#

“Hermione,” Harry said, highly intimidated by her huge pile of books neatly cutting her table off from the rest of the library, “Want to go visit the kitchens with me?”

“You knew about this?”

“I make candy there,” Harry said, piously avoiding any mention of testing candy on House Elves, and ignoring Hermione’s doubtful look.

“Look, you can do a survey,” Harry suggested. “That’s scientific, doing a survey. Maybe some House Elves really are happy, even if they aren’t all happy. That way you’ll have data to back you up when everyone’s arguing.”

Harry was somewhat alarmed by the light he sparked in her eyes.

#

Even Hagrid was adding to their workload. The Blast-Ended Skrewts were growing at a remarkable pace given that nobody had yet discovered what they ate. Hagrid was delighted, and as part of their "project," suggested that they come down to his hut on alternate evenings to observe the skrewts and make notes on their extraordinary behavior.

"I will not," said Draco Malfoy flatly when Hagrid had proposed this with the air of Father Christmas pulling an extra-large toy out of his sack. "I see enough of these foul things during lessons, thanks."

Hagrid's smile faded off his face.

"Yeh'll do wha' yer told," he growled, "or I'll be takin' a leaf outta Professor Moody's book....I hear yeh made a good ferret, Malfoy."

The Gryffindors roared with laughter. Malfoy flushed with anger, but apparently the memory of Moody's punishment was still sufficiently painful to stop him from retorting.

Harry, who knew Malfoy had been involved in some weird way in rescuing Buckbeak last year, caught him after the lesson, but Malfoy just glared at him.

“Don’t talk to me, Potter. I’m having enough trouble rescuing my dignity without being associated with you.”

“Maybe if you cared a little less about your dignity you’d be less easy to bait!” Harry yelled after him, which appeared to just make Malfoy’s shoulders twitch. Malfoy had been going around without his minions constantly right behind him lately, which Harry found very weird, and Harry had heard
that the Slytherin version of the Defense lesson on the Imperius had been pretty embarrassing for some people, naming no names, who could turn into a cat under the influence and do a little dance.

Still, if Malfoy wanted to be left alone, Harry was happy not to deal with him. He had enough problems with his Divination homework.

#

Harry was going about his day very peacefully a week or so later when a small white cat popped out of hiding from behind a statue. Harry glared at it. The cat shimmered into Draco Malfoy. He was smiling, which was never a good sign.

“What do you want, Draco?”

“Harry, is that any way to talk to a classmate?”

“I liked you better when you were making insinuations about my family.”

“I can do that as well, if you like. How *are* your muggles?”

“…forget I said anything. What do you want, Draco?”

“Well, you’ve had Defense. I want to practice the imperius curse.”

Harry stared at him.

“And you seem like someone who could use practice throwing off the imperius curse,” Draco continued. “Just in case.”

“It’s Unforgivable,” Harry said, rather blankly. “You’ll be sent to Azkaban.”

Draco drew his wand, glanced down at it with a small smile, and then drew a second wand from somewhere.

“Whoever owns this would be sent to Azkaban. *I* have never seen this wand before in my life.”

“You stole it, didn’t you.”

“Don’t ask stupid questions, Harry.”

“It’s dark magic. It does something to your mind.”

“…you are charmingly naïve if you think it’s the first dark spell I’ve tried.”

“That doesn’t make it a good idea!”

“Do you want to practice throwing off the Imperius or not? It’s all one to me.”

“We don’t have a place to practice,” Harry tried. “You want Peeves catching you trying out Unforgiveables?”

“I’ve seen that map of yours. You know every forgotten place in this school.”

“…well.” There was the Chamber of Secrets, admittedly, but Harry didn’t exactly feel like revisiting that particular set of bad memories. Almost dying had a way of making you remember a place unfondly.
“You could try it on me,” Draco suggested, “That would be fair, wouldn’t it?”

He could get Draco to apologize to Hermione on bended knee and tell Ron he thought Ron’s dad was a great role model.

Harry shook himself. What had he just been contemplating?

“No. No, this is a stupid idea. There has to be ways to prepare your mind for the Imperius that have nothing to do with doing Dark magic and getting expelled.”

“Like what?” Draco challenged.

“I don’t know. Occlumency would probably help.”

“Harry. You are ignorant about every facet of wizarding life, and you know what occlumency is?”

Harry gave him a flat, even look.

“Thanks for the idea, Harry,” Draco said with a sweet smile. “You’re a wonderful classmate.”

“Draco.”

“Yes?” Draco asked archly.

“If you keep being semi-decent in private and a prat in public, I’m going to start punching you in the face a lot. I don’t care how many points they take off for fighting.”

“Not worried I’ll hex you?”

“You’ve only ever hexed me when my back is turned,” Harry said dryly. “I’m probably safe.”

Draco glared.

“Say, is it true we’re sort of cousins?” Harry asked, since he had Draco here and he’d been thinking about it.

Draco looked blank.

“I was talking to a Black family portrait,” Harry elaborated. “She said the Blacks had married into the Potters and the Malfoys pretty recently.”

“Most of the old families are related,” Draco said, giving Harry a narrow-eyed look.

“It explains why you remind me so much of my cousin Dudley,” Harry added cheerfully.

Draco gave him a very evil glare and wandered off muttering something about twinkling and power of friendship and what was very possibly going to destroy them all with the power of my mind.

Harry was not certain which professor you warned about a classmate wanting to grow up to be a supervillain from a cheesy cartoon show, but he had a feeling he should probably do something about Draco being poised to break out into a full blown supervillain rant.

Sadly, trying to explain his concerns to Ron just led to Ron pointing out, “Well, he’s always been an evil little git, what’s changed?”

Harry had to admit that not very much had changed.
There was a line in Sirius’ next letter that made Harry feel light as air, and twice as bright.

*Should be able to arrange something for Number 12 for next school break, if you really want to visit there. I did mention the mad house elf & other assorted evil, didn’t I? Will send further word as soon as I’ve arranged security.*
The other schools arrived and Hagrid wore the most tremendous suit.

They ended up having lunch with Hagrid, though they didn’t eat much – Hagrid had made what he said was a beef casserole, but after Hermione unearthed a large talon in hers, she, Harry, and Ron rather lost their appetites. However, they enjoyed themselves trying to make Hagrid tell them what the tasks in the tournament were going to be, speculating which of the entrants were likely to be selected as champions, and wondering whether Fred and George were beardless yet.

A light rain had started to fall by midafternoon; it was very cozy sitting by the fire, listening to the gentle patter of the drops on the window, watching Hagrid darning his socks and arguing with Hermione about house-elves – for he flatly refused to join S.P.E.W. when she showed him her badges.

“It’d be doin’ ‘em an unkindness, Hermione,” he said gravely, threading a massive bone needle with thick yellow yarn. “It’s in their nature ter look after humans, that’s what they like, see? Yeh’d be makin’ ‘em unhappy ter take away their work, an’ insutin’ ‘em if yeh tried ter pay ‘em.”

“That may be the case for some House Elves,” Hermione said with tremendous dignity, “But my survey shows that even House Elves who consider themselves to have a ‘good master’ have unmet needs that wizards do not consider. House Elves at Hogwarts, for instance, feel that the school having a Caretaker is taking away valuable work from them, and that the school should consider admitting more students so that they have more to do. It may not be wages,” she added with a sniff, “But it is certainly Elvish welfare. And not all House Elves object to the idea of wages, either, once I explained it to them.”

Harry and Ron watched this speech with some bemusement, and Harry was rather worried he’d created a monster.

#

The fire in the goblet had just turned red again. Sparks were flying out of it. A long flame shot suddenly into the air, and borne upon it was another piece of parchment.

Automatically, it seemed, Dumbledore reached out a long hand and seized the parchment. He held it out and stared at the name written upon it. There was a long pause, during which Dumbledore stared at the slip in his hands, and everyone in the room stared at Dumbledore. And then Dumbledore cleared his throat and read out -

"Harry Potter."

#

The discussion about his nomination was awful, and Snape was dead silent throughout. Harry was attempting to think, and nothing was really coming of it. It only really got worse from there, his thoughts buzzing and disorganized, everyone by turns celebratory and suspicious.

"Listen," said Harry, "I didn't put my name in that goblet. Someone else must've done it."

Ron raised his eyebrows.
“What would they do that for?”

"I dunno," said Harry.

“I think I’ll talk to Professor Snape about it,” he added.

“That’s right,” said Ron, something ugly lurking in his tone. “You’re best friends with Slytherins now, aren’t you?”

Harry had been having such a good year.

#

“Well?” Professor Snape asked, without elaboration. At this point in their relationship, Harry understood the question.

“Someone’s trying to kill me again.”

“You will have to face the challenges alone, there is no way around that.” Great, Harry thought. “Durmstrang and Beaubaxton will cheat at every opportunity. I expect you to do the same.”

“Er. Professor-“

“Obviously, you will not be caught.”

“Will you help at all?”

“Professor Dumbledore wants his professors to remain neutral. You will not let this distract you from your course of study in Potions, Mister Potter. I am beginning to agree with your theory that your life will never wait until someone is not trying to kill you.”

#

He would have been looking forward to seeing Hagrid under normal circumstances, but Care of Magical Creatures meant seeing the Slytherins too - the first time he would come face-to-face with them since becoming champion.

Predictably, Malfoy arrived at Hagrid's cabin with his familiar sneer firmly in place.

"Ah, look, boys, it's the champion," he said to Crabbe and Goyle the moment he got within earshot of Harry. "Got your autograph books? Better get a signature now, because I doubt he's going to be around much longer....Half the Triwizard champions have died...how long d'you reckon you're going to last, Potter? Ten minutes into the first task's my bet."

Harry punched him in the face, and got tackled by Goyle in the bargain. Hagrid hauled them off each other, and assigned them all detention together with a dreadful look on his face.

“Sorry, Hagrid,” Harry muttered. He wished he and Ron were talking, because usually he and Ron held each other back from actually attacking Malfoy.

#

Detention involved mucking out the stables of the Beaubaxton horses. Hagrid didn’t stay to supervise. Harry did his very best not to breathe, Goyle tripped Harry into the muck, Harry tackled Goyle into the muck-
“Both of you stop it,” hissed Draco, standing well back from their filthy fight rolling around the stable floor. “I’m disgusted to know either of you. Get up.”

When Goyle obeyed, Harry stood as well. Draco hissed out a couple of charms, and Goyle and Harry were clean and vaguely presentable once more.

“What is wrong with you two?” Draco asked.

“He started it,” muttered Goyle.

“I’m sorry if I don’t find Voldemort trying to kill me again that funny, Draco,” Harry snarled.

“…that isn’t something to joke about,” Draco said, paling. Draco in a stable was still sort of weird and wonderful, even without the subject matter.

“Let’s work,” Harry suggested, and went back to shoveling disgusting, caustic straw.

“Peasant,” Draco muttered.

“And proud of it,” Harry confirmed.

“It’s not Voldemort,” Draco added, poking at a lump of horse dung with a fork as if he’d never done an honest hour’s work in his life.

“Sure it is,” Harry retorted happily, pleased to have someone he could tell who wouldn’t worry about him. “I had a vision and everything. He’s got a horrible long term plan.”


“Me?”

Draco ran a harried hand through his hair, knocking it into an odd state of disarray. Harry thought about telling Draco he looked a lot better when he wasn’t so pressed, and then decided that was crazy talk.

“I have to tell my father,” Draco said.

“Why? Wouldn’t he know?”

“He’s spent a lot of time, effort, and money convincing everyone he hated – you know.”

“Mine, too,” Goyle grunted.

“How do you think He is going to feel about that? Not warm and cuddly. If he’s back….”

“He might be a little ticked about your dad getting his old diary stabbed with a Basilisk fang,” Harry added, because Draco panicking was funny. “Oh, and about the dead basilisk. His sixteen year old ghost seemed pretty attached to the old girl.”

“Your life is absurd.” Draco informed him distractedly, with a look of introspective horror.

Goyle was frowning, too, though he wasn’t using it as an excuse to avoid shoveling dung. Harry decided to concentrate on detention for a change.

#
Draco fell into step next to Harry, two and a half days later, expression very neutral.

“What.”

“…here. Read it.”

Dear Draco,

The information about Him was very useful to my planning. If Potter seems willing to share more details, it would behoove you to spend more time with him. A revival of early attempts at friendship would not go amiss, in the interest of keeping an eye on the situation.

I remain your loving father,

Lucius

“Your dad,” Harry said slowly, “Wants you to pretend to be my friend for information.”

“Mhmmm.”

“Everyone else in the school hates me,” Harry continues, “And your dad wants us to be friends.”

“Mhmmm.”

“The entirety of Slytherin is going to want to kill you,” Harry added helpfully. “Hufflepuff, too. And Gryffindor’s going to try to kill me.”

“You could say no to this nonsensical idea,” Draco added with faint hope.

“Oh, no. I’m not giving up someone who has to put up with me,” Harry said with relish. “But you’ve got to leave the bodyguards behind.”

Draco’s silence was magical.

“We can work on Quidditch,” Harry offered. “We wouldn’t have to actually talk to each other, that way.”

“…deal.”

So that was what they did. They set a Snitch loose and night after night, took turns catching it.

Harry won four times out of five, and tricked Draco into scrubbing his own mouth out with soap.

At which point it turned out Draco was willing to hex him to his face, and they got detention again. It became something of a pattern, since Harry and Draco couldn’t actually spend more than half an hour together without starting a fight, and Harry was feeling angry enough with the world that it precisely suited his mood.

(In another reality, Draco came up with the idea to make insulting charmed badges for the school to wear. In this reality, Draco was busy hexing Harry’s teeth.)

Madame Pomfrey was not impressed. Professors Snape and McGonagall were not impressed. Really, no one was impressed.
“Didn’t think you and Malfoy were close,” Moody commented. “Considering.”

“We’re not,” Harry said. “His dad wants him to keep an eye on me.”

“And you let him?”

“I mostly like the part where I hex him,” Harry admitted.

“Might want to work on that temper, boy,” Moody told him. “Could get you into trouble.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“It’ll give you both practice with CONSTANT VIGILENCE.”

And that, apparently, was that.

#

Harry wished that Professor Snape being his tutor meant Professor Snape was less likely to poison him, but the one time he dared to suggest this as a teaching method, Professor Snape asked if Harry was asking permission to be careless, and Harry decided to drop the subject forever.

#

Rita Skeeter's smile widened. Harry counted three gold teeth. She reached again into her crocodile bag and drew out a long acid-green quill and a roll of parchment, which she stretched out between them on a crate of Mrs. Skower's All-Purpose Magical Mess Remover. She put the tip of the green quill into her mouth, sucked it for a moment with apparent relish, then placed it upright on the parchment, where it stood balanced on its point, quivering slightly.

"Testing...my name is Rita Skeeter, Daily Prophet reporter."

Harry looked down quickly at the quill. The moment Rita Skeeter had spoken, the green quill had started to scribble, skidding across the parchment:

Attractive blonde Rita Skeeter, forty-three, whose savage quill has punctured many inflated reputations -
"Lovely," said Rita Skeeter, yet again, and she ripped the top piece of parchment off, crumpled it up, and stuffed it into her handbag. Now she leaned toward Harry and said, "So, Harry...what made you decide to enter the Triwizard Tournament?"

"Er -" said Harry again, but he was distracted by the quill. Even though he wasn't speaking, it was dashing across the parchment, and in its wake he could make out a fresh sentence:

An ugly scar, souvenir of a tragic past, disfigures the otherwise charming face of Harry Potter, whose eyes -
"Ignore the quill, Harry," said Rita Skeeter firmly. Reluctantly Harry looked up at her instead. "Now - why did you decide to enter the tournament, Harry?"

"I didn't," said Harry. "I don't know how my name got into the Goblet of Fire. I didn't put it in
Rita Skeeter raised one heavily penciled eyebrow.

"Come now, Harry, there's no need to be scared of getting into trouble. We all know you shouldn't really have entered at all. But don't worry about that. Our readers love a rebel."

It was at this point that Harry decided he didn’t like her.

“Candy?” he offered, pulling a bag out of one of his extra pockets. He studied them in the dimness — looked like Calming Chocolates. That’d work, even if he’d prefer the raspberry ones for her.

“No, thank you, Harry. About the tournament—"

“Are you sure? They’re really very nice. The headmaster always says every situation’s better with candy.”

The headmaster did not always say this, but Harry kept the bag of chocolates helpfully outstretched until Miss Skeeter took one between two fingers and popped it into her mouth.

She got the interview back on track, so to speak, after that, but her questions were not quite so rushed and Harry felt a little less overwhelmed than he might have. So he offered Dumbledore a chocolate too, which he accepted with a knowing twinkle, and went on to offer them around to everyone at the Wand Weighing.

Harry did not feel guilty at all about the whole thing going smoothly and calmly, everyone mellow as marshmallows in summer. He needed a bit of peace and quiet in his life. Rita Skeeter even moved slowly enough that Harry escaped most of the time with the photographer.

#

One of the secondary headlines about Harry in the paper that had Draco passing it to him wordlessly during Potions read:

**RIVALS IN LOVE**

_The rivalry between Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter is well-known both on and off the Quidditch pitch, and it's even been speculated that Mister Malfoy has aspirations towards a certain brunette. He is known to object strongly to Potter’s relationship with Hermione Granger._

Harry could think of absolutely nothing to say. Draco’s comment, later, when they were hovering in midair over the Hogwarts lawn, was, “You didn’t catch it, did you?”

“Catch what.”

“Our implied forbidden homosexual love.”

Harry’s grip slipped on his broom, and he held on wildly with his knees.

“Darn,” Draco said mildly, “I was hoping you’d fall off.”

“Your sense of humor is vile.”

“She said I had feelings for a ‘certain brunette,’” Draco explained. “If my father wouldn’t have her out of a job within a day, I bet she would have gone further.”
“About our forbidden homosexual love,” Harry said flatly.

“That’s right.”

“…shut up and play, Malfoy,” Harry said.

He really didn’t want to think about it.
Draco and Harry both got kicked out of the library after getting into a shouting match about who got to borrow the last copy of *500 Countercurses Across The Ages*.

“Why not do this with Crabbe and Goyle?” Harry asked, sometime after it became clear to both of them that their habit of dueling at every opportunity had become a real habit and not just something they did when they were angry. They’d started to get the knack for when certain corridors didn’t have other students and teachers around to get caught in the crossfire.

“You have the best reflexes in the school. They’re *slow*.”

“Did you just give me a compliment, Malfoy?”

“You’re still terrible at Quidditch, Potter. Don’t let it go to your head.”

“I don’t think those two go together.”

“You catch the Snitch by fainting, falling off your broom, breaking your arm, or catching it in your *teeth*. It’s not my fault your good choice in brooms and weird luck disguise your lack of actual ability.”

Harry hit him with the strongest disarming spell he could, because he’d gotten his breath back. Draco responded by changing shape and darting into the shadows behind a statue.

“You’re *white*,” Harry pointed out, and got Draco with a tickling jinx as he darted from one bit of cover to another.

#

“Why’re you really doing this?” Harry asked Draco, offering him a dose of healing potion for the blossoming bruises – they’d made the mistake of talking during today’s fight and it had dissolved into a flurry of fists and hair pulling Harry was never, ever admitting to. Harry could admit that neither of them thought clearly when they started talking about families.

“Oh. I realized last spring that I don’t want you to die.”

“…so you’re helping me learn to duel?”

“Only as a side effect. I’m going to convert you.”

“You want me to be a Death Eater. *Me*.”

“Look at it from my point of view.”

“My point of view is that he murdered my parents and I still hear my mother begging for mercy in my dreams.”

Draco was silent for a moment, then shrugged.

“You never knew your parents, really. They’re an – an idea, to you. You *know* me and Professor Snape.” Draco gave him a direct, eerie look. “You think I haven’t been paying attention to how much time he spends tutoring you?”
“It’s just Potions,” Harry muttered. “He hates me.”

“But you don’t hate him. You practically worship at his feet.” Draco jerked his chin up and met Harry’s eyes. “I’m not going to push. There’s no rush.”

Harry wished wistfully for a couple years ago, when Draco’s idea of a cunning master plan was tricking Harry into getting detention and losing house points. What a sweet, innocent time that had been.

#

“If you’re so interested in learning dark magic and curses, why do you never try to hit me with – with crucio or something?”

“Are you saying you want me to?”

“No. I just want to know why not.”

“Mm. It’s not my style.”

“…I think you’re right, but I didn’t think you thought so.”

“If I told my father he’d treat it as a horrible weakness, but I’ve decided it’s a strength to know how I want to approach things. Power’s all about being able to do what you want, and if what I want is to do things without any messiness, why shouldn’t I?”

Draco sounded rather defiant. Harry tried to figure out how to handle this declaration of purpose.

“…you could be a healer or something and not fight anyone.”

“Don’t be stupid.”
The first task came around before Harry realized it – Draco had been keeping him busy, what with them trying to turn each other into armchairs – and it was dragons. A letter from Sirius suggested he concentrate on his strengths and mentioned he’d tracked down who Bertha Jorkins had been – a Ministry witch murdered in Albania. Harry was more determined than ever to succeed at the first task, or at least not die, when Sirius confirmed that he’d made arrangements about Number 12.

I may not be able to be there– have to keep moving – but we’ll see. Can’t put details in a letter.

Harry had a persistent vision of running away to Number 12 before the holidays to hide from the dragons, but without an adult wizard there he suspected he’d just end up getting cursed again, and visions of sarcasm danced in his head.

He faced the dragon, and survived, and it was good. Things were back to normal with Ron, and somehow that meant without much discussion that things were back to normal with Draco – Draco didn’t seek him out, and pale eyes didn’t veer sideways indicating a side hallway they could duel in anymore.

Harry was surprised to miss it, but he’d missed Ron more.

#

Harry had a nasty shock when he realized the Yule Ball meant he was expected to stay at Hogwarts for Christmas – the first Christmas he actually wanted to go someplace else, he thought resentfully. He wrote to Sirius and received reassurances that things could still go ahead over spring break, assuming his Champion duties allowed.

Being a Champion was a pain.

And then, the day after the Yule Ball was announced, Draco Malfoy approached Hermione as they were leaving Potions and bowed politely.

“Miss Granger. May I have a word?”

Hermione looked at him strangely, but nodded.

“Privately?”

“As if we’d let you take Hermione off someplace to hex,” Ron said hotly.

Draco smiled thinly.

“Very well. Miss Granger, would you do me the great honor of accompanying me to the Yule Ball?”

Harry choked. So did Ron.

Hermione said, “You know you’d have to touch me to go to the ball with me, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Draco said, mild as milk. “I’m aware.”

“You don’t like me, do you?” she asked in dawning horror.

Draco’s eyes half-lidded.
“You’re a very pretty girl, and anyone would be lucky to have you attend with them.”

Now, everyone who knew Draco Malfoy knew he was lying, but it was at this point that Ron put his foot in it.

“Everyone knows you’d never ask Hermione! And she’s going with me, aren’t you, Hermione?”

“Thank you, Draco,” she said very coolly. “I’d be happy to go to the Ball with you, since you were nice enough to ask.”

To put it very mildly, Ron was not happy. Draco, on the other hand, seemed quite smug about the newspaper headlines that followed this invitation.

After one too many strident objections from Ron, Hermione said, “Honestly. He’s been much better this year, and Harry’s friends with him. I’m sure we’ll find something to talk about. He must be quite good at transfiguration to be an animagus, and I’ve been thinking about working out my own transformation.”

“You’re friends with Malfoy?” Ron asked Harry. “I thought you were just putting me on, because you were cross.”

“Er,” Harry said eloquently.

At which point Ron decided the only way out was to throw himself bodily into the lake, and Harry had to talk very quickly indeed to get Ron to snap out of it.

#

“And how does the second task progress?” Snape asked in the first week of Christmas break.

Harry tried to look innocent.

“I see,” Snape said very precisely.

“Look, you’re not allowed to help—“

“No, I am not. I am, however, not forbidden from making your life miserable until you make progress. Life is full of little surprises, is it not?”

Harry scowled at him.

“The contact poison will take 48 hours to work. Either make your own antidote or make progress on your puzzle, Mister Potter.”

Harry really hated him.

“You’re not allowed to murder students.”

“Oh, it won’t kill you,” Snape said quite cheerfully.

Erk.

#

The day before the Yule Ball, Harry took it upon himself to tag along with Ron, Fred, and George, who cornered Draco before dinner.
“Right.” Ron gave Draco the evil eye. “This may be some horrible joke for you, but you are going to be nice about it tomorrow and treat Hermione like a lady. Or we will make the rest of your life at school hell.”

Draco, who was vastly outnumbered, shifted uncomfortably, gaze darting between them, shifted into a cat, and bolted without shame.

#

“Hullo, Harry,” Draco said, when Hermione had gone off to dance with Victor Krum and Draco was following their path through the crowd with hooded, pale eyes. Harry, who had been abandoned by Parvati, looked awkward.

“Er. Hello, Draco.”

“Enjoying yourself?”

“Sure. You?”

“Surprisingly well. She cleans up nicely, doesn’t she.”

Harry studied Draco, who was still watching Hermione and Krum.

“No,” Harry said flatly.

“I’m sorry?”

“No. You don’t – no.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

“Aren’t you supposed to have some sort of moral objection to dating Hermione?” Harry asked desperately.

“Only if I was serious,” Draco said absently. “A little bit of fun is understandable… and it does make Weasley make the best faces.”

“No.”

“Lighten up, Harry. Your face will stick that way.”

Harry grabbed Draco’s arm, and Draco shook him off.

“You’re going to catch people’s attention,” Draco murmured. “Stop being ridiculous, I’m not going to hurt her.”

Harry growled in the back of his throat.

“I’m going to listen patiently some more while she explains about the plight of house elves and how muggles are very clever for visiting the moon. The only person in danger will me being bored to death.”

Since this at least sounded like Draco was still Draco and not someone using Polyjuice for some arcane reason, Harry drifted away, staying close enough to keep a weather eye on the pair throughout the evening. Hermione ended up spending quite a bit of time dancing with other people, which was something, he supposed, but somehow Harry still ended up standing with Ron.
bemoaning life, the universe, and everything.

“I reckon he’s slipped something into the water so everyone likes him,” Ron opined about Draco.

Harry nodded glumly.

“’s really the only explanation.”

“Don’t worry, Harry,” Ron said seriously. “I’ll save you both.”

“Thanks, Ron. You’re a true friend.”

They fled into the rose garden, where they overheard an interesting (ominous) conversation between Snape and Karkaroff.

#

By the end of Christmas break, Harry had been poisoned five different ways, made 23 different possible antidotes, and figured out progressively that the egg was speaking a magical language, specifically (after an antidote that turned him blue) Mermish. He was also very grateful for Cedric’s hint, which may have saved his dignity, if not his life.

Harry would really have preferred not to have the motivation.

#

The papers seemed quite full of Harry and Draco’s fictitious fight over Hermione after the Christmas break, including a number of technically accurate but very misleading quotes from Draco himself.

“What’s wrong with you?” Harry hissed at Care of Magical Creatures class.

“Just playing to the narrative,” Draco murmured. “By the way, the other option was Hagrid being half-giant. I suggest you give Ms. Skeeter a proper interview before she works her way around to it. For some reason, she doesn’t like you.”

“I can’t say I like her much, either.”

“Like my father says, we’re not allowed to kill reporters, so we must live with them.”
“I am researching potions for breathing underwater for reasons completely unrelated to the second task,” Harry informed Professor Snape, dragging a large pile of library books into the Potions lab.

“Remind me to teach you how to lie at some point,” his professor said, watching this. “Water breathing potions are quite beyond you, but you might as well make the attempt.”

This turned out to be entirely accurate – Harry’s first water breathing potion left Harry unable to breathe water or air until his professor eventually took pity on him and provided an antidote.

The second and third didn’t go much better. It was a work in progress. Professor Snape kept giving him pitying looks as if Harry was missing the obvious, but seemed in no hurry to enlighten him at all. Harry rather thought Professor Snape didn’t care very much if Harry won.

Draco Malfoy kept turning up to ask Hermione to study with him in the library, turning Ron an interesting splotchy red color. She refused to go on any actual dates with him, but Draco didn’t seem to object.

One day, when Harry, Ron, and Hermione had been joined by Draco again and Harry was trying to figure out whether or not he was angry, Greg Goyle came over and sat down next to Draco, and Draco turned to stare at him.

“What are you doing here, Greg?”

“We’re friends with them now.”

“…Greg. No.”

“Aren’t we?”

Draco appeared actually truly speechless. Harry leaned his chin in one hand and watched it with delighted interest.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Draco settled on finally.

“Talk about what?” Greg asked.

“Talk about – oh, Merlin.”

“Talk about what, Malfoy?” asked Ron, who was still just barely civil with Draco in the same room.

“This isn’t happening to me,” Draco said quietly. “It’s all a horrible dream and I’ll wake up soon.”

“Honestly,” said Hermione tartly. “Goyle – Greg – would you like help with Charms? I know you have trouble with them.”

“Sure,” Goyle said agreeably.

Harry shared a horrified look with Draco. This was just not right somehow.

Crabbe appeared to be trying to murder Harry with his eyes from across the library, and Harry had a
horrible sinking feeling. Oh, well.

“Want some peppermints, Goyle?” Harry asked.

#

If Harry had a better hold on his temper, he might have given Rita Skeeter an interview, and not ended up shouting at her in a pub. Oh, well.

#

“Hey, Hermione?”

“Mm?” she said, chewing on a quill.

“What do you actually like to do? I mean, I know you like to read, and you’re good at all the classes, but – you’re good at all the classes. I like Potions, and Ron likes chess… d’you want to be a librarian, do you reckon?”

“Well, there’s nothing wrong with being a librarian, of course, it’s a hallowed and challenging profession, but no. I think I’d like to do something about the Ministry. They really don’t think about other species, you know, like the House Elves and the Centaurs and the Goblins.”

Harry nodded.

“I think someone should do something about that too,” he said, “But I don’t think I can do that and a Potions Mastery at the same time. So I’ll just have to help you with it.”

“About time,” she said teasingly. “I wouldn’t mind the newspaper articles saying ‘Hermione Granger’s friend Harry,’ every now and then.”

Harry visualized this, and grinned. That would be pretty great.

#

Harry would probably have enjoyed meeting mermaids more under other circumstances.

#

When Harry confronted Professor Snape after the second task about the entirely fictitious water-breathing potion he’d been working on, Professor Snape just smiled at him.

“Your obligation is to compete, not to win. In any case, you wanted to learn the Wolfsbane, did you not? The first steps are the same.”

Harry was torn between anger and despair, and ended up sitting down and laughing into his hands.

“You’re never going to be a regular sort of teacher, are you.”

“No. I never am.”

“And you were a Death Eater.”

“Yes.”

“I heard you talking to Karkaroff.”
“You do have a habit of eavesdropping.”

“I wish they’d make this elaborate plot to kill me a little less elaborate. I’m tired.”

“One thing, Potter.”

“Yes?”

“Where did you get the gillyweed?”

Harry froze. Where had Dobby gotten the gillyweed from.

“One of my friends gave it to me,” Harry said with absolute truth. “Right before the Task. I didn’t ask where they got it.”

“I see.”

Harry shot him a wary look.

“Did your friend also give you boomslang skin, earlier this year?”

“…no. That’s for Polyjuice. You know what I’m like at brewing Polyjuice.”

Harry had tried making some last term and managed to ruin a near-perfect batch on the 27th day. His professor’s silence had been eloquent.

“If any of your other little friends think it’s a good idea to steal from me, do disabuse them of the notion. Or I will.”

#

One night as winter was turning to spring, Hermione lured Draco into discussing his animagus transformation.

“The meditation to find the form took the longest time. The ritual itself wasn’t that hard, but I almost lost it midway through. Which would have meant ending up a real cat, not a wizard that was cat-shaped, you know. I did it here at school, which was a mistake in retrospect. Greg helped.”

“I watched,” Greg agreed.

“Professor McGonagall said that if I even hinted to other students that they should try it unsupervised she’d turn me into a stone statue and leave me that way,” Draco added. “So I won’t say that Granger could probably pull it off and the rest of you would probably die horribly.”

Hermione blushed.

#

Talking to Sirius about the whole problem at Hogsmeade weekend in March didn’t help Harry figure it all out, but it certainly helped him get a better grasp of the situation. Everyone but Harry and Hermione seemed pretty sure that Snape could easily be behind things, which left Harry feeling off kilter and strange – wouldn’t he know if his teacher was really out to kill him? He didn’t say anything about stuff Snape had said to him privately, because it felt wrong, and it left him with nothing he could say about the man. Maybe Snape was just under an obligation to teach Potions, and it wasn’t about Harry at all….
"I've worked things out with Dumbledore for Easter holidays," Sirius told Harry in an undertone. "Here, read this."

12 Grimmauld Place is the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix.

"What's the Order of the Phoenix?" Harry asked.

"Old name for something Dumbledore organizes. Easy way to say people he trusts, which is important. He was thinking about asking me for the use of the house already, so when I asked him for help with a Fidelius... well, it all worked out. I'll keep an eye on you for the hols." Sirius added hopefully, "Unless you change your mind about wanting to see the old place. I've been back, and it's just as bad as I remember."

"I'm sure it's awesome," Harry assured him with all the fervor in his heart. "Once you get rid of the most obviously evil stuff, I mean."

"We'll be working on that," Sirius promised him. "Too bad you won't be able to do it by spell, with the trace and all, but I'm sure we'll manage."

(Which gave Harry an idea....)

#

“Professor?”

“Concentrate, Potter.”

“But, Professor-“

“Do you want to lose another batch to your carelessness?”

Harry was silent and frustrated through wrapping up his antidote, and only once it was jarred did he say, “Potions masters take apprentices, don’t they? To help them, and to learn things.”

“They do.”

“Have you ever?”

“No. Teaching at Hogwarts has been my occupation.”

“But would you, ever?”

“If you complete your seven years of study successfully, there are masters I can recommend you to.”

That really had not been what Harry wanted to hear, but he bit back a comment to that effect.

“Potter,” his professor said, and hesitated. “If you survive to graduate, I may well be tired enough to retire at the end of that time.”

Harry snorted, and moved on to cleaning up from his potion.
Interlude: Why Draco and Harry Stopped Dueling

Rewind, if you will, to shortly after the Yule Ball.

“Petrificus totalus. Get his feet, Dobby!”

Which is how Harry ended up carried, paralyzed, through the hallways to the Hospital Wing by a Dobby who paused every now and then to try to pull his own ears off, and Ron, who did not bother to explain where they were going.

Harry would rather have gotten his clothes on first, that’s all he’s saying.

Upon explaining to Madame Pomfrey that Harry was definitely under a curse to spend time around Draco Malfoy and being assured by Madame Pomfrey that Harry’s aura was completely normal for Harry, Ron slumped at the head of Harry’s hospital bed, Dobby sitting disconsolately at the foot.

“But, Harry – if you’re actually spending time around Malfoy – why?”

Harry mumbled something.

“What was that?”

“I think he’s….,” Harry mumbled the rest.

“I just want you to be honest,” Ron said miserably.

“I don’t know, Ron. I don’t go looking for him, he just keeps turning up.”

“I reckon,” Ron said slowly, “He’s got you a little turned around, because he used to act really awful, and now he only acts sort of awful. And you feel sorry for him because Slytherin doesn’t like him so much this year, and you know what that’s like, being alone at the head of the crowd.”

This was such an accurate summation of Harry’s feelings about Draco that he stared at Ron in some consternation. He forgot, sometimes, that Ron was better at certain things than he was – like explaining people, when Ron took the time to do it.

“You forgot he’s evil,” Ron summarized, and Harry grinned. And that was usual-Ron, reassuring as ever.

“Professor Snape’s pretty evil, too,” Harry said cheerfully. “Sirius, too, I think, or at least he was raised quite evil – his first suggestion for the dragon Task was a nasty curse, did I tell you about that? It just goes to show that you can be raised quite evil and not turn out that bad. Sort of – evil-flavored, not rotten.”

Dobby said firmly, “Master Draco is bad.”

“…how bad?” Harry asked, dreading the answer.

“He is shouting and throwing things and being cruel to animals,” Dobby said firmly. “He is not liking anyone but his friends and is not thinking they are worth anything.”

Harry nodded.
“Dobby is not understanding why Harry Potter is liking him.”

“I wish Hermione were here,” Harry muttered. “Right. I might be crazy, but this year it seems like he’s been acting less like a spoiled brat and more like a person?”

Dobby looked doubtful. Harry looked doubtfully back.

“Mate, I think we all know it must be rotten for any kid being raised by Draco’s dad, but you can’t save everyone,” Ron said with finality. Harry sighed and flopped back on his pillow.

At this moment, Madame Pomfrey interrupted.

“Mister Potter. I am quite busy, you know.”

“Yes, Madame Pomfrey?”

“So I’ve just been to get a teacher, since you seem certain you need extra practice with curses outside of class. Professor Moody, you’re sure you can take care of this?”

“Absolutely,” Professor Moody said, giving all three of them a hairy eyeball. “Potter. Weasley. I was expecting Malfoy.”

Dobby disappeared with a pop.

“I thought Malfoy might’ve cursed Harry to want to be his friend,” Ron said. “But Madame Pomfrey said not.”

“He’s not cursed,” Moody said, “Just a soft touch. Detention, with me, Potter. And Malfoy. For unauthorized dueling.”

Harry nodded, quite intimidated.

Detention as assigned by Moody and done under Hagrid’s supervision was very terrifying, involving the Forbidden Forest and collecting baby spiders. Lots and lots of baby spiders.

“We are never dueling someplace anyone can catch us ever again,” Draco hissed to Harry after a particularly blood-curdling chase scene where Draco had been treed like a cat and actually had to fight back against the spider horde. Harry, who hadn’t actually been that scared, put on his best sympathetic face.

The problem was that Draco wouldn’t change his mind, no matter how Harry hinted that wouldn’t Draco enjoy running for his life while Harry practiced his aim some more. For some reason, Draco didn’t find it compelling.
Harry held his breath when Professor McGonagall went around with the list of students staying for Easter holidays and he didn’t put his name down, but she didn’t appear to think anything of it. He didn’t want to answer any questions about it, since Sirius was still technically an escaped convict, even if the Ministry was making absolutely no effort to catch him. (His conversations with Hermione on the subject had been pithy.)

The next step was a little more fraught. He waited until Draco had finished dinner and left alone, and slipped out of the great hall after him.

“Draco.”

Draco turned, giving him a cool look.

“Yes?”

“D’you still have that-“ a first-year wandered past and Harry paused. “Fake wand?”

“Yes, as it happens.”

“Get it from an adult wizard, did you?”

“Again, yes.”

“Can I borrow it?”

“If I may borrow your cloak sometime.”

Harry frowned.

“I thought not,” Draco said with a nod.

“Yes,” Harry said, trying not to think too hard about it.

Draco gave him a very considering stare. Harry shrugged.

“I’ll have it for you tomorrow.”

Harry was going to stay in a wizard’s house with a wand without the trace. It did not particularly matter to Harry that the wand did not like Harry very much – instead of bright red and orange sparks, purple drips of light fell lazily from the wand when he tried it. Lazy was a good way to describe the wand’s apparent personality – it would do what you wanted, sort of, eventually, if you shouted loud enough and really concentrated, but it was nothing like the light, fiery feeling of using his own holly wand.

#

Harry told none of his friends about his Easter plans, on Sirius’ quiet instruction. Instead, he packed his bag after everyone had gone to bed, with things for the week and a few assorted bits of this and that that barely fit in his trunk. His bag, which was somewhat Extended these days, held everything without a mutter. Harry and his invisibility cloak made it onto the train just before departure, and he spent his time lurking awkwardly in the train corridor.
It was good practice, he told himself bracingly, for stealth. Even if it did feel a little silly.

#

Harry slipped into the loo of the Muggle side of King’s Cross and came out visible again. And lurked. Awkwardly.

“Hullo, Harry.” said a quiet voice, almost lost in the bustle of the muggle train station. Harry looked around and stopped dead.

“Professor Lupin?”

“I told you to call me Remus,” his old professor said, still tired and careworn, but with a small smile on his face.

“I thought-“ Harry glanced around. “What’re you doing here?”

“Picking you up.” Lupin – Remus – smiled. “Padfoot’s still talking me into bad ideas, it turns out.”

“This is a wonderful idea,” Harry protested.

“Come along, Sirius tells me you know about cars and things.”

“We can get a taxi,” Harry offered.

“Sirius will be delighted,” Lupin said half-seriously.

In the taxi, Remus gave Harry a calm look and said, “So, how did Sirius talk you into this one?”

“I talked him into it,” Harry said firmly. “I wanted to go to a real house for the holidays, just in case I die in the Tournament.”

“Which is very similar to what he said to me,” Remus said with a sigh. “But you do realize we’re kidnapping you, don’t you?”

Harry looked blank.

“I’m going home for the holidays with my godfather. That’s not kidnapping.”

“He’s still an escaped prisoner.”

“Not very escaped.”

“And Dumbledore still takes your safety very seriously. The only reason I went along with this was that I knew Sirius’d do it without me, at which point there’d be no one to watch your backs.”

Harry gave Remus a somewhat severe look.

“Did my dad ever tell you it was his job to make you have fun? Because it seems like something someone should tell you. We’re going to dealing with a whole house full of horrible cursed artifacts and creatures. It’s going to be wizard.”

Remus seemed overwhelmed by this argument, and Harry settled back in his seat, satisfied.

“Want a chocolate?” Harry added. “I made them.”

“Certainly,” Remus said politely.
Remus spent the rest of the taxi ride napping, which was good, because he seemed like he very much needed a nap.

#

Number 12 was still dingy and awful. The main difference was that the portrait of Sirius’ mother had a curtain over it, which Harry approved of entirely, and Kreacher didn’t get the door. Instead Remus let them in, and said with a sigh, “If you don’t mind, Harry, I think I’m going to lie down for a while. Sirius should be around somewhere. He said he’d be taking his temper out on one of the nests in the drawing room.”

Harry nodded thoughtfully, and tried to pretend he didn’t know where the drawing room was.

#

Harry proceeded to have the best two weeks of his life, bar none. Sirius was very good company, of the aggressive sort, and they had lots of tales about his father. Kreacher was sulking and Harry didn’t see him much at all, which left Harry master of the kitchen.

On the first evening, Harry was sitting around a table with Sirius and Remus, Remus having left them entirely to their own devices all day (“I want to be rested in case of emergency, not run around joining in this bad idea.”) when Harry remembered his main planned contribution to the cause.

“Are you sure I can’t do magic?” he asked Sirius.

“Not worth the potential hassle,” Sirius said. “And it builds character or something,” he added, with a somewhat guilty look at Remus.

Remus had a certain expression on his face whenever Sirius gave Harry advice.

“Well, I made this at school,” Harry said. “It doesn’t count as doing magic here.”

He pulled a pale blue flask out of his bag and poured it slowly on a patch of dust on the floor. Soapsuds dripped from the flask to the floor, slowly, until a little pile the size of a small dog had accumulated.

It blinked open bright blue eyes, and purred, blowing bubbles at them.

Harry said, “Er. It’s not actually supposed to-“

The soapbubble pile purred louder, and motored around the floor. In its wake, it left a path of shiny polished wood.

Sirius broke down laughing.

“Do you think it’s dangerous?” Remus asked, hiding his expression behind a glass of water.

“…it’s just a scrubbing bubbles potion,” Harry said faintly. “It’s just supposed to clean a surface until it’s done cleaning. Um.”

“Never heard of it,” Sirius said. “We can always banish it if it causes trouble.”

It turned out that the pile of animate soap did not cause much trouble, as long as it was fed adequate amounts of water. It chased dirt all over the house, turned out to do a pretty good polishing effect, and seemed to be in no hurry to disperse.
“I think I put in too much magic,” Harry said numbly, as his soap bubble creation chased Kreacher down the upstairs hallway a couple days later.

“This is the best thing I’ve seen in years,” Sirius said. “So, what’s his name?”

“…well,” Harry said. “It purrs. Her name could be Kitten.”

“Kitten it is,” Sirius agreed.

And that, somehow, was that.
Sirius and Harry de-infested Harry’s chosen room on the fourth day, and Sirius repaired the broken windowpane and turned the faded velvet curtains a firm red trimmed with gold, to make Harry feel at home.

Left alone in his room later, Harry very cautiously put a couple of his books on the newly empty shelves, and propped up a couple pictures of his parents and Ron and Hermione.

Then, after a few minutes staring at this feeling odd, Harry went and got a couple forks and knives from the kitchen, and transfigured them firmly into picture frames with Draco’s stolen wand. It took a few tries, but he ended up with reasonable looking silver frames and a wall that actually showed that Harry had been here, and existed.

For the next half a day Harry waited cautiously for an owl arriving telling him he was doomed, but nothing came for whatever reason. Definitely better than staying with the Dursleys.

Remus maintained his careful neutrality on the subject of reclaiming the house from dirt, Kreacher, and evil portraits, and mostly spent his time sitting at the dining room table sipping tea and reading the paper. Sirius was more active, but every now and then he’d just break something and Harry would have to pause and stare at him.

“Doesn’t it bother you?” Sirius asked abruptly, after he’d torn a screaming portrait off the wall.

“What bother me?”

“The – this house. It’s saturated in darkness. Don’t you feel it?”

Harry considered this.

“A bit. I suppose I just thought that was how it felt. It’s just sort of a whisper, isn’t it? It doesn’t take much concentration to ignore. Like… well. Like a Dementor or something.”

Sirius scowled at the portrait on the floor.

“…I suppose it’d be worse for you,” Harry allowed. “Sorry.”

“No,” Sirius said. “This helps. Building new memories, ones that haven’t been – drained. It helps. It’s just sometimes I need to break things.”

“Alright,” Harry said agreeably. “Let’s find the worst stuff in here and destroy it into tiny pieces.”

So that’s what they did.

Harry and Sirius opened the door to the library and peered inside. It was still filthy, since Kitten hadn’t broken down any doors as of yet, and dark, and there were cabinets of things.

“Let’s not,” Harry said abruptly. “I never liked books that much anyway.”

“They’re mostly full of curses,” Sirius agreed.

“We should go bother Remus.”
They never did get around to dealing with the library that visit.

“Harry,” Remus said, “What are you and Sirius planning today?”

“We’re tackling the Potions lab. We think if we deal with the things making the clicking sound and the ingredients that are fermented and prone to explode, I can do the rest myself and reclaim it.”

“That’s….” Remus trailed off. “Be careful of him, please.”

“Sorry?”

“He loses track of what year it is, sometimes. And you look so much like James. I don’t want him to forget you’re not an adult wizard he’s known all his life who can take care of himself. He’s supposed to take care of you.”

Harry thought this was a charmingly naïve statement about adults in relationship to himself, Harry Potter, but he liked Remus and was too polite to say so.

“He said it was helping to build new memories,” Harry offered.

“…good. That’s good.”

“Don’t worry,” Harry said firmly. “I’m always careful.”

Remus gave him a somewhat condescending and Adult look, but since Remus of the three of them was the one who was consistently adult all the time, Harry forgave him. After all, Remus was here watching their back when he could have reported them to Dumbledore or someone who didn’t think fighting dark nuisances for days was fun.

Two weeks passed far too quickly. Harry stole a chest to put at the foot of his bed from the room next door, and completely failed to finish dealing with all the weird stuff in the upstairs Potions lab.
Harry was discovered on the train back to Hogwarts by a Prefect tripping over him, but since he was supposed to be on the train, they couldn’t exactly take points off. He slunk into a compartment full of strangers and endured curious looks at The Harry Potter.

Hermione had somehow developed a reputation as a man-eating siren, which Harry found frankly weird. She was apparently the sought-after bride of him, Draco, Neville, Krum, and a few other boys besides, and Harry just wanted to stick his hands in his pockets and go ‘I could never date someone who likes books better than me.’ But he didn’t say that, because she was his best friend and it would just be taking his temper out on people. Never before had going to Hogwarts felt like leaving home to Harry. He wasn’t sure he liked it, and he was wary of disturbing his wards by thinking too much about things like home. He wasn’t sure what would muck with them and what wouldn’t, and it left him trying to police his own thoughts.

“Missed you at Easter, Potter,” Moody said.

“Went home to visit my family,” Harry said, avoiding his gaze. Moody had been an auror. It just didn’t seem sensible to tell him about visiting his escaped convict godfather.

Moody grunted.

“I don’t like muggles,” Greg said to Hermione one evening.

“Why not?” she asked in reply.

He frowned.

“If they were gone, we’d have more stuff.”

“If they were gone, we wouldn’t have food or roads or trains,” Hermione said tartly. “Not everything can be made by wizards.”

Greg fell silent, and everyone moved on with studying, assuming it had gotten lost somewhere in his head.

“You’re a muggle,” Greg said to Hermione after a while. “I like you.”

“I’m muggleborn,” Hermione said. “And… thanks.”

“Greg,” Draco said sharply, and Greg fell silent, staring vaguely at the book he’d been holding for the past half hour.

“Oh, why do you even pretend – you’re not even trying!” Hermione said, grabbing the book out of his hands.

“Don’t know how to read,” Greg said proudly.
“You. What.”

“Well, a little,” he admitted.

“Greg’s father thinks reading rots the brain,” Draco explained dryly. “A good wizard learns by memorization and oral tradition. It’s too bad Greg’s no good at memorizing things either.”

Hermione sputtered quite a lot after that.

#

A few days later Hermione asked Draco, “Is it really true that there’s no standard wizard preparation for Hogwarts?”

“Of course not. Magic’s not standard, is it?”

Hermione stared at him.

“I had a few different tutors,” Draco explained. “How do muggles do it?”

“You go to school,” said Harry, “Every year except summers. Same as Hogwarts, only for reading and maths.”

“Sounds dreadful,” was Draco’s opinion. “Though I suppose it would spare one from lectures on how things have gone downhill since we started writing spells down.”

Harry and Hermione exchanged horrified looks.

#

“Chocolate?” Harry said, since Draco looked like he was about to start screaming at Crabbe, and that would disrupt Potions class.

“If I have to tell you one more time not to bring food to class, Mister Potter,” Snape interrupted in his very best form, “I shall hang you upside down and shake you.”

“Why do you constantly offer people candy?” Draco asked later as they left class. “You aren’t going to be a shopkeeper, you know.”

“I could be a shopkeeper. Nothing wrong with being a shopkeeper. It sounds peaceful.”

“I’m serious. Why?”

“You ever not had enough to eat?”

Draco looked at him blankly.

“Candy makes me happy,” Harry said.

And Harry didn’t see a reason it had to be more complicated than that.

#

Despite Professor Snape being moderately helpful about Harry for once doing the right thing and running right to the headmaster with a problem, namely Mr. Crouch talking to trees, they did not reach the forest in time to prevent Mr. Crouch’s disappearance.
Having another vision of Voldemort did not endear Harry’s scar to him one bit, and talking it over in more detail with Dumbledore, and then Sirius, Ron, and Hermione did not help. They just didn’t have enough information, any way they turned it around. Professor Snape was not interested in speculating, since he’d gotten it into his head that Harry would complete a successful batch of Polyjuice before the end of term and it was not going particularly well. Harry wanted to ask if Snape would be happy if Harry died because he’d been distracted by brooding Polyjuice like a chicken, but ended up staying quiet. It just didn’t seem diplomatic.

Harry did comment when their last lesson before the third task was a lightning round of making a scarily precise batch of healing potion, though. Harry looked at the neat silver flask full of potion, etched with a snake, and said, “I’m going to be fine.”

“Then you will spare Madame Pomfrey a small amount of labor,” Professor Snape said.

Harry fought his way through the maze and got his leg ripped open by a giant spider, at which point Harry was very grateful to have a spot of healing potion to glug down surreptitiously while Cedric looked at the golden cup. It made him feel a little better about what he felt was not a very strong showing at the Task.

Cedric died.

Harry wished he’d said proper goodbyes to his friends and his family and his teachers, just in case. Lord Voldemort was alive.

They dueled.

Harry took Cedric home.

Harry felt very numb while confronting Moody and being interviewed by Dumbledore and Sirius.

"He’ll be fine," said Madam Pomfrey, giving Harry some pajamas and pulling screens around him. He took off his robes, pulled on the pajamas, and got into bed. Ron, Hermione, Bill, Mrs. Weasley, and the black dog came around the screen and settled themselves in chairs on either side of him. Ron and Hermione were looking at him almost cautiously, as though scared of him.

"I'm all right," he told them. "Just tired."

Mrs. Weasley's eyes filled with tears as she smoothed his bed-covers unnecessarily.

“I need to talk to Draco,” Harry said abruptly. “I have something to say to him.”

Ron and Hermione exchanged anxious glances, and Ron got up and left the room.
Madame Pomfrey had compelled Harry to drink a Dreamless Sleep potion by the time Draco turned up. His pale face shone oddly in Harry’s muzzy vision.

Harry grabbed his sleeve and tugged Draco down so he was less wavering and far away.

“You don’t have to tell your father,” Harry informed him. “He already knows.”

Sirius growled.

“You’d better go,” said Hermione.

#

"You'll forgive me, Dumbledore, but I've never heard of a curse scar acting as an alarm bell before...."

"Look, I saw Voldemort come back!" Harry shouted. He tried to get out of bed again, but Mrs. Weasley forced him back. "I saw the Death Eaters! I can give you their names!"

And he hesitated, and behind the Minister Snape shook his head, once.

Harry paused, and it gave Fudge time to say, “I’ve trusted you a great deal this year, Dumbledore, and what do I have to show for it? Nothing but chaos and disorder. I’ve had enough, do you hear?”

"It seems to me that you are all determined to start a panic that will destabilize everything we have worked for these last thirteen years!"

#

It turned out that when one was a semi-accepted escaped felon, it was quite easy for one to become a most wanted escaped felon again. All it really took was reassigning the case to a different pair of Aurors.

#

Draco avoided Harry, and Harry was happy to let him. He kept remembering Lucius Malfoy’s smooth professions of loyalty whenever he looked at blond hair.

#

Snape was at Harry’s bedside, looking like death, eyes fever-bright and full of murder.

“Harry,” he said, watching Harry’s face carefully. “Would you come with me now, if I asked you to? If I said it was important?”

Harry put his hand on his wand, trying as hard as he could to read this man who he still didn’t know, even after years of teaching and learning and hating and-

“No,” Harry said, and prayed it was the right answer. “I don’t think I will, thanks.”

Professor Snape did not smile.

“I will see you when term resumes, Harry.”

Harry fell back against his pillow and wished he didn’t think ‘Harry’ was code for ‘do nothing I say.’
Hermione had just finished explaining about Rita Skeeter being an animagus when the door of the train compartment opened and Draco and Greg appeared in the doorway.

Under the circumstances, Harry wasn’t sorry about drawing his wand.

“Jumpy, Potter?” Draco asked softly.

Harry said nothing.

“Well. I’d like a word. Greg can stay here, as assurance to your friends of my good behavior.”

Which led to Harry standing in a train corridor, looking at Draco with very mixed feelings.

Draco lifted his chin and met Harry’s eyes, expression exceptionally unreadable.

“I have a favor to ask.”

“…depends on the favor.”

“Do you know someplace Greg could go? For the summer.”

“Why.”

“Because the Dark Lord-“ Draco caught himself, and took a breath.

“Because Greg’s an idiot. Because he’s… my idiot. No sense of subterfuge, no sense…. He thinks you’re his friend. He thinks-“

“He sort of is my friend,” Harry admitted. “Not sure how that happened.”

“His father is my father only without the wit and charm,” Draco said flatly. “If he thinks Greg is disgracing the family name, he will kill him. So. Do you know someplace Greg can stay this summer?”

Harry went quiet for a minute. Draco’s father thought murdering eleven year olds with cursed objects was a reasonable thing to do. Mr. Goyle and Mr. Malfoy had both watched while Harry was tortured and Voldemort set out to murder him slowly.

“Why didn’t you ask Dumbledore?”

“He wouldn’t get between a pureblood sire and his heir. He wouldn’t care about Greg.”

“Snape?”

“As if he’d do anything to draw the Dark Lord’s ire right now.”

Harry frowned, thinking. He couldn’t exactly pay for a room at an inn all summer, or put Greg up at the Dursleys….

“He’d have to stay at Sirius’ place. But he’d have to stay, the location’s secret. Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. You know Greg by now – he changes his mind about once every ten years.”

Harry had to admit that sounded about right.
“And you?”

Draco smiled very thinly, pale eyes hooded.

“My father and Greg’s father share politics, not intelligence or childrearing habits. I’ll be fine.”

“Really?”

“Of all my friends,” Draco purred, “I’m the only one who can say their father or guardian has never hit them. Happy?”

Harry winced, and didn’t argue.

“Draco. Voldemort-

“Oh, don’t. Honestly… I’d prefer to stay out of it. If I could. But you know I can’t, Harry.”

“Draco-“

“I can’t.”

There was something raw and honest and awful in Draco’s pale eyes, and Harry looked away, thinking about Cedric and Lucius Malfoy and….


“Thank you,” Draco said formally. “I appreciate it.”

“He’ll be alright to come back to Hogwarts in the fall?”

“No one can take a child out of Hogwarts,” Draco confirmed.

“Right,” Harry said again.

#

Harry sent an owl to Sirius from the train, and didn’t say a word about it to Hermione or Ron.

“What did he want?” Ron asked.

“To say we weren’t friends anymore, what with his dad wanting to murder me,” Harry said, staring out the window.

Which rather killed the conversation.

#

"Fred - George - wait a moment."

The twins turned. Harry pulled open his trunk and drew out his Triwizard winnings.

"Take it," he said, and he thrust the sack into George’s hands.

“What?” said Fred, looking flabbergasted.

"Take it," Harry repeated firmly. "I don't want it."
"You're mental," said George, trying to push it back at Harry.

"No, I'm not," said Harry. "You take it, and get inventing. It's for the joke shop."

"He is mental," Fred said in an almost awed voice.

"Listen," said Harry firmly. "If you don't take it, I'm throwing it down the drain."

“If we win the war and survive and everything, I’m going to want a job,” Harry said, thinking it up as he went along. “And you’ve been doing a good job selling my candy so far. It’d be nice if there was a joke shop waiting for me to work there, after I’m done at Hogwarts.”

#

A black dog was sitting by a taxi outside King’s Cross and gave Harry a serious look. Harry nodded, and told his uncle, “One minute.”

He grabbed Greg’s arm and said into his ear, “Go with the dog. Do whatever he tells you.”

Greg nodded, looking like nothing so much as a giant thunderstorm, and followed Sirius obediently into the crowd.

This, Harry thought faintly, was doing nothing for Harry’s nerves.
Greg sat quietly in the chair where he’d been told to sit and looked around as best he could without seeming to look around. The group that had assembled around him seemed to have an awful lot of redheads in it. Weasleys. That made sense, since this was Dumbledore’s lot. There was also the dog animagus everyone called Sirius. Greg wasn’t sure if that was a pun or not. Everyone seemed to want to talk to him in quiet tones, so that Greg wouldn’t overhear.

Greg was not in a hurry to eavesdrop, so that was alright.

“What is so urgent that you summon me-“ said a vicious, familiar voice.

Greg smiled.

“Hullo, Professor.”

Professor Snape stared at him as if Greg was a bug. That was okay. Greg was used to it.

“Mister Goyle. Did you get lost?”

“No, sir.”

“Do you know where you are?”

Goyle had to think about this one. He was not precisely sure.

Professor Snape pinched the bridge of his nose and looked like he had a headache. Greg got that a lot.

“I assume he is the reason I was asked to bring veritaserum?”

“Sirius just brought him,” confirmed one of the redheads. “But we don’t know why or if he’s a spy or what. Sirius says it was Harry’s idea.”

Professor Snape shot Sirius a look of intense dislike. Greg was glad he wasn’t the one getting that look.

“Very well.”

Professor Snape took the glass on the table, filled it with water, and added a number of drops of clear liquid.

“Drink, boy. And pray you are not here as a spy. I imagine there would be nothing left of you if anyone attempted a memory charm.”

Greg drank the truth serum, and felt almost exactly the same.

“Does anyone object to me asking the questions?” Professor Snape said, eyeing Greg. “He is mine to watch, ten months out of the year.”

“Go ahead,” said Sirius, pulling up another chair and sitting in it backwards. “But I’ve got a few of my own when you’re done.”

Greg waited patiently. Professor Snape sat down too.
“Why are you here, Mister Goyle?”
“I followed the dog.”
“Why did you follow the dog?”
“Harry told me to.”
“Why did Harry tell you to?”
“Draco asked him to.”
Professor Snape took a breath.
“Very well. Why did Draco ask him to do that?”
“I don’t know.”
“Please speculate, Mr. Goyle.”
“I don’t understand. What’s speculate?”
“Did Draco say why he was asking Harry to – did Draco say what he was asking Harry to do?”
“Yes.”
“What was he asking Harry to do?”
“Find me a place to stay for the summer.”
“Why?”
“Because of my dad.”
Professor Snape did not immediately ask another question, but Greg did not feel like talking more about his dad. He didn’t like talking about his dad.

“Explain, as best you can, the events that led you to be sitting in that chair, Mr. Goyle.”

“Draco made friends with Harry in first year. Then I decided in fourth year that if Draco was going to spend all his time with Harry, I should be friends with Harry too, because Draco was my friend. Then Hermione explained that muggles had been to the moon and we shouldn’t kill them, and I promised her I wouldn’t. Then I told Draco about that and he told me I was going to get myself killed. Then the Dark Lord returned. Then Draco said he wouldn’t let me get myself killed and to shut up and let him think. Then he talked to Harry about it on the train. Then Harry said I should obey a dog. Then I followed the dog. Then the dog told me to sit in the chair.”

The dog-man Sirius was grinning in a weird way, and the redheads were talking a lot.

“The part about Hermione’s true, sir,” said Ron. Greg had missed Ron in all the redheads. “I was there for the part where she explained about them sending men to the moon by using giant fireworks.”

Everyone seemed to have an opinion about this, so Greg took a moment to look around. He looked down under the table.
“There’s soap eating your shoe,” he told his professor.

Professor Snape peered under the table too. The soap had blue eyes and was covering both of Professor Snape’s feet.

“That’s Harry’s Scrubbing Bubbles,” said Sirius in a choked voice. “I think it likes you.”

After that Professor Snape put his hands over his face for a while.

“Do you… like Harry?” asked Sirius.

“Yes.”

“Do you always answer questions with as few words as possible?”

Greg had to think about this one for a while.

“Yes.”

“Mr. Goyle is known,” said Professor Snape distantly, “For being a bully, an idiot, and a follower of Draco Malfoy. None of which explains… this.”

“Yes, it does,” Greg says, since truth serum didn’t stop him from talking if he wanted to.

“It does?” asked Professor Snape.

“Yes,” Greg paused, and said slowly, in case Professor Snape had a headache and was having trouble with words the way Greg sometimes did, “Draco’s on Harry’s side. This is Harry’s side.”

“Draco Malfoy,” Snape said very slowly. “Is on Harry’s side.”

Greg nodded.

He considered and added, thoughtfully, “He lies a lot.”

“Yes, it is apparent that he does. Are you certain?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, don’t cry, Snivellus,” said Sirius, grinning some more. “I’m pretty sure this is good news.”

“Is there any particular reason Draco Malfoy thinks he can lie to the Dark Lord?” Snape said abruptly.

“He’s good at Occlumency. Been studying it all year.”

“Being good is not enough, when it comes to-” Professor Snape stopped short, closing his eyes.

“Were there any other questions you wanted to ask before I administer an antidote?” he asked Sirius, not looking at him.

“What would you like to happen now?” asked Sirius.

“Dinner,” said Greg promptly.

Sirius broke down into cackling, mad laughter.
Severus Snape sharpened his quill and began to write.

Dear Mr. Potter,

Your recent failure at creating a tolerable cleaning potion has been brought to my attention. As a related matter, you owe me a new pair of shoes in the amount of 3 galleons.

“Severus,” said Lucius Malfoy, “We are trying to hold a meeting. Must you engage in correspondence?”

“Has the Dark Lord graced us with his presence yet?”

“No.”

“Then I have time to address a problem.”

I have been unable to duplicate this error and require an account of how you created the potion and what unusual measures you may have included.

“What has you so very focused?” asked Lucius.

“Potter has created an abomination against the Potions art and I cannot understand how he did it. I am going to strangle him until the little miscreant coughs up what he did wrong.”

“I think,” said Lord Voldemort’s light, amused voice, “We have more pressing reasons to strangle Harry Potter. May I see this letter?”

Severus stood, and handed it over with a bow.

“A cleaning potion, Severus?”

Severus bowed low.

“I do not often encounter a new problem in Potions, my lord,” he said, glancing up and meeting his master’s eyes. He let the need to know slide to the forefront of his mind.

“Ever the scholar, Severus. “

His master handed the letter back, and Severus folded it and tucked it away to finish later.

“To work, gentlemen,” Lord Voldemort said.

A prompt reply is requested.

Severus Snape

#

Dear Harry,

We are not supposed to write details in owled letters.

Yours sincerely,
Gregory Goyle
#

Dear Harry,

I know I’ve said it before, but chin up – things are moving along and I think I’ve got it worked out now. You’re not supposed to know about the place we’ll meet, so I won’t describe it. It’s not dusty.

Snuffles
#

Dear Harry,

Did you have to send him? He’s decided Hermione’s his new best friend….

Sorry, letter got interrupted. He asked Hermione to go on a date with him. Don’t know what’s wrong with him, but it’s something major.

Now Hermione’s mad at me because I said something was wrong with him when I just meant.

You know what I meant. Now she’s said she’s going to teach him to read.

No more news than you’ve got about the important stuff, but hopefully they’ll let you come soon. Not used to dealing with him for this long without someone to keep me from punching him. F and G just egg me on.

Your friend,

Ron
#

Dear Harry,

I’ve enclosed my notes about the summer reading assignments. Looking forward to seeing you!

Hermione
It turned out that when you were busy worrying about Lord Voldemort, it made worrying what the Dursleys thought of you rather hard. This had a number of effects, starting with Harry having an idea for a recipe and idly wandering into the kitchen.

Harry was halfway through coaxing the stove to do things a stove was unlikely to do and deeply in need of a muggle candy thermometer, with two other dishes in various stages of preparation before Aunt Petunia caught him.

Harry turned to look at her rather guiltily, large bowl of sugar in one hand and whisk in the other.

“Vernon!” Aunt Petunia yelled. “Vernon, the boy’s doing something!”

Aunt Petunia was a tattletale.

Harry considered his tactical situation. He had his wand, but Uncle Vernon had reach. No adult wizards around to mask the trace, and he didn’t have a spare wand on him. (Had to get one of those of his own as soon as possible.) Worst came to worst he could dive out the window, and in the likely event that he just ended up manhandled like a kitten, he had a candy for bruised dignity.

Harry took a second to put the bowl of hot sugar down. That was just an accident waiting to happen. After a second, he took a chocolate out of his pocket and ate it.

For some reason, Harry was looking very calm when his Uncle Vernon stormed into the kitchen.

“What are you doing, boy.”

“Making lemon candy for Dudley and his friends, and a French soup for dinner. Chocolate?”

“I don’t want a chocolate, boy! Where’s the money coming from, hm? I won’t have you wasting my money on this garbage!”

“I got a job,” Harry said calmly.


Harry thought about this question.

“I mostly work in the school kitchens,” Harry said, because being calm did not prevent you from lying.

This got a bark of laughter from Uncle Vernon.

“Everyone finds their own level, don’t I always say that, Petunia?” He shook his finger at Harry. “Good to hear you’re contributing something! Don’t muck it up. No foreign muck in my kitchen.”

He took Aunt Petunia’s arm to lead her into the other room to talk about Harry, and Harry heard Uncle Vernon telling her, “Best news I’ve heard all year. Boy might just turn out normal. I know a man who’d be willing to hire him to wash dishes, great man, he puts up with all sorts.”

“But Vernon-“

“Got to encourage him when he shows signs-“ after which Harry couldn’t eavesdrop anymore, and
he had to return to his candy before it went quite wrong. Concentration, Harry thought firmly, was key.

Somehow, this led to Harry doing all the cooking around the house, though he avoided doing the grocery shopping and Aunt Petunia gave him cookbooks that were allowed. Everything that was not in the approved cookbooks were not allowed.

Because Aunt Petunia made him itch, Harry experimented with spices in the allowed recipes. Aunt Petunia eyed Harry suspiciously over dinner, but since she still avoided being in the same room with him, it worked out okay. Not great – Harry went through all his calming chocolates over the course of four weeks – but okay.

Dudley seemed under the vague impression Harry was his own personal House Elf, who would be happy to make him candy and cakes on demand. Harry countered by requiring Dudley to go to the shops for ingredients. Dudley countered by threatening to punch him. Harry countered by giving Dudley a look.

Later, Harry asked Dudley over lemon pie, “Why’d you run off earlier?”

“You don’t know what you look like sometimes,” Dudley muttered.

“Sorry?”

“You think all this stuff,” Dudley waved a fat hand vaguely. “Is great. It’s not great. It’s scary.”

Harry ate another bite of pie.

“I think it’s great and scary,” Harry offered.

“See, this is why we all think you’re round the bend,” Dudley said kindly.

Harry politely refrained from giving Dudley a look. He studied his fork instead.

“Piers reckons since you’re so round the bend, I should be nice to you ‘cause it’s not your fault you’re weird.”

“You… actually talk about me?”

“You were acting extra weird last summer,” Dudley explained. “He says he’s got a mad uncle.”

Harry gave Dudley a look, and Dudley took the rest of his lemon pie and fled. Harry thought it was probably because his look was trying its best to say ‘you are not Lord Voldemort and at this point everything else just isn’t scary in comparison.’

#

“Boy,” said Aunt Petunia abruptly one day, when the sun was especially hot and Harry had been lurking inside to try to steal the newspaper. “We’re going out.”

“Aunt Petunia?”

“Do you have your money?”

Harry gave her a suspicious look.

“A bit,” he allowed. Mostly from letting Dudley act as a sort of dealer for him this summer, his only
source of muggle money.

“Come along.”

Which was how Harry had the very disconcerting experience of going clothes shopping with Aunt Petunia. New trainers weren’t terrible, since he could get them with red stripes on sale, but trying to work between his budget and Aunt Petunia’s idea of respectable looking produced a furious Harry and a seething Aunt.

It didn’t help that someone just out of sight was giggling.

Harry, who resolutely refused to wear anything he thought a Muggle Draco Malfoy would wear, ended up with a couple pairs of jeans and a few t-shirts in his size.

“Now,” Aunt Petunia said, with the air of a woman about to die, “A haircut.”

“No.”

“Now, a haircut.”

“You remember what happened last time we tried that?”

By Aunt Petunia’s expression, she did indeed remember what happened last time she tried that. Her lips thinned into near nonexistence.

“One of the neighbors was commenting on me again,” Harry said flatly.

Aunt Petunia didn’t say anything to this.

“How about I make more of an effort to stay out of sight?” Harry offered.

In the end, Harry did not get a haircut, but he did get a lecture on gratitude. He was, he noted with some pleasure, getting better at tuning those out.

#

Harry getting Dudley attacked by Dementors did not endear him to the Dursleys, and as he listened to the Order very carefully not explain why they weren’t explaining anything to him, Harry realized something with crystalline clarity: something was very wrong with Professor Snape, because Professor Snape would have known this was a really stupid plan.

It didn’t help Harry’s temper.
In exchange for their really helpful complete lack of information, Harry borrowed a trick he hadn’t used in about five years. It had, once upon a time, been dangerous for him to do better than Dudley in school, so Harry was very good at playing dumb. Grimmauld Place? London? Order of the Phoenix? Arabella Figg on Dumbledore’s short list of trustworthy people? Harry has never heard anything about any of this. Harry’s a mushroom, kept in the dark and fed….

Well. It provided enough humor to the situation for him to get through being around actual-Moody, while he made a mental note to learn the disillusionment charm as soon as humanly possible.

“Sorry,” Harry apologized to Ron and Hermione (and Greg, lurking silently in the background) after yelling at them. “This house always makes me moody, if I’m not paying attention.”

“It does?” asked Ron. “I thought you loved it here. I was really surprised when everyone said you didn’t know what it was, but Hermione kept me from saying anything.”

“Try Occlumency shields,” Harry advised.

“Oh,” Hermione said in tones of surprise. “I hadn’t realized. What’s causing that?”

“Some dark object or other,” Harry said with a shrug. “It’s not so bad if you’re not Sirius, it hits that same part of you that’s in Azkaban, I bet Hagrid would hate it too.”

“But, Harry,” Hermione said worriedly, “Sirius has to stay here now. The Ministry’s tearing the country apart looking for him, because Fudge is so angry with Dumbledore.”

At which point Fred and George interrupted, so Harry was left with another worry to add to the back burner.

#

“I said--shut--UP!” roared the man, and with a stupendous effort he and Lupin managed to force the curtains closed again.

The old woman’s screeches died and an echoing silence fell. Panting slightly and sweeping his long dark hair out of his eyes, Harry’s godfather Sirius turned to face him.

“Hello, Harry,” he said grimly, “I see you've met my mother.”

“She’s in a very good mood,” Harry said.

“She’s put a permanent sticking charm on the back of her portrait.”

“I bet she’d cheer up if you got a kid to stand quietly while she recited her family tree,” Harry offered.

Sirius gave him a penetrating look, then ruffled his hair.

“I don’t know half the things you get up to, do I.”

Harry grinned at him.

“I’m glad someone’s keeping his spirits up,” Sirius commented, and Harry put a mental exclamation
point next to his mental note about Sirius’ mental wellbeing.

His kitchen had been thoroughly taken over by Mrs. Weasley. Harry, who was quite tired, thought that was alright. It all seemed very lived-in somehow. Maybe he could invite all the Weasleys to move in with him and Sirius permanently. That – that was a really nice dream. Harry was going to come back to that dream.

#

Harry felt something brush against his knees and started, but it was only Crookshanks, Hermione’s bandy-legged ginger cat, who wound himself once around Harry's legs, purring, then jumped on to Sirius's lap and curled up. Sirius scratched him absent-mindedly behind the ears as he turned, still grim-faced, to Harry.

“Had a good summer so far?”

Harry dredged up another smile for his godfather.

“Well, I was bored.”

Sirius barked bitter laughter.

“Been boring around here, too.”

“How come?”

“Because the Ministry of Magic's still after me, and Voldemort will know all about me being an Animagus by now, Wormtail will have told him, so my big disguise is useless. There's not much I can do for the Order of the Phoenix ... or so Dumbledore feels.”

There was something about the slightly flattened tone of voice in which Sirius uttered Dumbledore's name that told Harry that Sirius, too, was not very happy with the headmaster either. Harry felt a sudden upsurge of affection for his godfather.

At this point in the conversation, Kitten swept through the room and Molly Weasley swatted at her with a broom.

“Upstairs, Kitten!” she ordered fiercely. “Upstairs!”

“She likes people,” Sirius informed her tiredly. “I told you.”

“Kitten,” Harry said. “I saw a delicious-looking dust bunny on the third floor landing. You can have some outdoor mud later.”

Kitten purred away out the door again, and Sirius laughed.

“Only funny thing to happen around here all month,” Sirius told him. “Come to a turn, when I’m spending my time watching a ball of soap.”

“Kitten’s a very complex magical artifact,” Harry said piously. “You should say thank you.” He paused. “And I bet you like how she drives Professor Snape crazy.”

Sirius looked beautific.

“He can’t even be in the same room with her. He gets this twitch.”
Dinner was going very well until Molly Weasley started arguing with Sirius.

“He's not a child!” said Sirius impatiently.

“He's not an adult either!” said Mrs. Weasley, the colour rising in her cheeks. “He's not James, Sirius!”

“I'm perfectly clear who he is, thanks, Molly,” said Sirius coldly.

“I'm not sure you are!” said Mrs. Weasley. “Sometimes, the way you talk about him, it's as though you think you've got your best friend back!”

“I’m not asking about Voldemort,” Harry said abruptly, “Because I’m going to find out whether or not you lot tell me. I’ve done that every time before this, and I’ll do it this time too. Why’re Sirius and Professor Snape the only ones who notice that?”

Mrs. Weasley was wonderful, but that didn’t mean she got to question Sirius’ sanity in front of Harry. Harry had a number of jobs in his life, and taking care of Sirius was undoubtedly one of them. He met Remus’ eyes across the table, and Remus looked away.

“You see?” asked Mrs. Weasley, still talking to Sirius. “You keep encouraging him to act rashly—“

Harry was very tempted to start breaking plates, but he let the argument play out anyway.

“He's not your son,” said Sirius quietly.

“He's as good as,” said Mrs. Weasley fiercely. “Who else has he got?”

“He's got me!”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Weasley, her lip curling, “The thing is, it's been rather difficult for you to look after him while you've been locked up in Azkaban, hasn't it?”

Sirius started to rise from his chair.

“Molly, you're not the only person at this table who cares about Harry,” said Lupin sharply.

“Sirius, sit down.”

“Right,” Harry said to Ron, after Fred and George had left. “Nice room, but there’s been a bit of a misunderstanding. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“You’re not sleeping here?”

“I’ve got my own room, don’t I?” Harry asked. “G’night.”

And Harry slipped out of the room he’d been ushered into by Molly, covered in his invisibility cloak, and then Harry knocked on Sirius’ door.

Sirius barked at him softly, so Harry let himself in. He sat down next to Sirius on his bed, and ruffled his furry ears.
“Life’s a little easier as a dog, isn’t it.”

Sirius nosed at Harry’s leg, and Harry gripped his ruff affectionately.

“I’m not her son,” Harry said quietly.

Sirius went still.

“It’s nothing to do with her, really. She’s lovely. So’s Mr. Weasley. But she has screaming rows with her sons. She never has screaming rows with me.” Harry tried to put it into words, the oppressive aura of the house not helping. He closed his eyes for a moment, visualizing the perfect feeling of a snitch in front of him, darting through the air. It helped, a little. “You were the only one who asked me how my summer’s gone, today. She just thinks she knew. Everyone thinks they know who I am.”

Sirius’s ears were drooping. Harry decided that the better part of valor was stopping talking before he set Sirius to biting Mrs. Weasley, and curled up to sleep with Sirius as a pillow.
Mrs. Weasley seemed to think the children could be distracted from their plotting via chores, but Harry decided he was a little cross with her and immediately skivved off with Fred and George to test magic candy recipes they’d been working on, chatting amiably about his new idea for a lemon flavored one to cheer people up.

“We’ve been marketing yours to St Mungos children’s department,” George told him, passing him a purple thing to test. Harry eyed it cautiously. “Because we always hated drinking potions as kids. Who doesn’t love candy? But they’re taking a while to catch on, so we thought we’d try something aimed at parents instead.”

“How’s production?”

“We’ve been able to keep up with demand so far, since we’re not in the Order, but it’ll be tricky once we get back to school,” Fred allowed. “That’s where you come in, partner.”

Which is how Harry found out that Fred and George were much more efficient than their mother at keeping him too busy to think about Voldemort.

#

“So,” Harry asked Professor Moody, “If two students were fighting all the time, would you send them into the Forbidden Forest to collect spiders until they decided to change their ways?”

“Yes.”

“Huh. He did a really good impression of you.”

“He asked me for advice, Potter.”

Harry decided to get out of that conversation pretty quickly.

#

Number 12 was beginning to look actually good, though apparently Harry’s idea and Mrs. Weasley’s idea of good had some divergence, since she kept finding things for the troops to do. Harry settled back into his room nicely once he cleared up that little misunderstanding with Mrs. Weasley. He found the way her eyes turned teary as she looked at his pictures on the wall really very alarming, and the hug was… well. It was a hug.

She speed-knitted him a bedspread in red yarn and Harry had to hide in his wardrobe for an hour, letting the small space soothe the part of himself that wanted to burst into tears. It felt like being back in his cupboard, all dusty and slightly lemon-scented. It was really nice. He made a mental note to never dust it.

#

“Kreacher,” Harry said quietly, having found a moment when he wasn’t surrounded by people. He knew how he’d feel if he’d been alone for fourteen years and then suddenly had all these people. He
was feeling rather that way himself, and he’d only been alone at the Dursleys for a month.

“Kreacher has been ordered to be polite,” Kreacher informed him. “So he cannot tell you how horrible you are, bringing awful magical things into his Master’s house.”

“I live here too,” Harry said firmly.

“Kreacher wants to know how you defeated the Dark Lord.”

“Well, I won’t tell you unless you stop calling Hermione a – bad names. Not even under your breath.”

“The master’s godson,” Kreacher informs thin air, “Has terrible friends, just like the master.”

Harry sighed.

“I’ll help you rescue a few things from the cleaning spree and tuck them away in the attic,” Harry offered. “Clean, mind. Not covered in doxy eggs or anything else that’s going to hatch.”

And suddenly, they were in business. Even if Harry wasn’t entirely sure this was a good bargain to have made. Still, he’d gotten into the habit of shielding Hermione from horrible, bigoted insults, and he wasn’t going to stop now. Harry gave Kreacher quiet orders about taking care of the Potions lab upstairs, which Harry had kept locked because he could see two things vividly in his mind: Mrs. Weasley finding it, and Fred and George finding it.

Harry was almost busy enough to forget his hearing, but luckily he was living in a cursed house that kept the bad things in life firmly in the forefront of one’s mind whenever one let one’s guard down (which was mostly right before bed, lying in the dark). Harry reminded Sirius frequently and firmly to Occlude, but in an undertone, because he didn’t want anyone thinking his godfather was really crazy and taking him away somewhere. Harry had suspicions about Mrs. Weasley, who already thought Sirius wasn’t godfathering right. Sirius complained he was pants at Occluding, so they settled for breaking some awful old plates whenever Sirius got too frustrated.

Despite some effort, Harry cornered neither Professor Snape nor Greg in the time before his hearing at the Ministry. Greg seemed to be constantly wandering the house, aimless and silent, retracing his steps and walking in circles, pausing only to obey direct orders.

#

Harry had been wanting to talk to Professor Dumbledore at the trial, but he didn’t have the chance.

He ended up making another short line in his dream journal, which had turned mostly into a ‘notes about curse scar’ journal, written in what he hoped was sufficient code.

One instance, brief, lunch after hearing. Talking to Ron, Hermione.

It wasn’t that he thought there was a pattern, he was just preoccupied about Professor Snape, and taking notes about things made him think maybe later Professor Snape would think he wasn’t completely hopeless.

There was really only one more interesting thing that happened that summer, but it was a doozy.

#

“Found it,” Greg told Harry happily. “Come see.”
“Found what?” Harry asked, following him upstairs.

“The cursed thing,” Greg said. “Left it in my room because I didn’t want anyone nicking it.”

“Which cursed thing? There’s loads.”

“The one you were looking for,” Greg informed him.

Greg held out a handsome necklace – a locket.

“Had to fight that house elf for it,” Greg added. “But I didn’t kill him.”

“…thanks,” Harry said faintly, eyeing it warily. Remembering the last time he’d picked up a cursed object in this house. “How’d you find it?”

“Found the part of the house where I was saddest. Took a while.”

Harry stared at the locket for a minute.

“…we should talk to Sirius. He might know what it is. Maybe he’ll want to keep it.”

Sirius did not want to keep it.

#

What followed could only be called a comedy of destruction. Sirius tried smashing the locket, which broke his hammer. He tried melting it, which melted its chain and turned the fire an awful black color. He tried hitting it with spells, which burnt the floor and brought Molly Weasley down on all their heads, though Sirius hid the locket pretty quickly from her.

In the end, Harry stuck it in a box lined with woven spider silk and thistle pods, which at least made its aura a little less malignant.

Kreacher, who had been watching their antics for the past few hours, took it out of his startled hands.

“Kreacher keeps it.”

“That can’t be good for you, Kreacher,” Harry told him firmly.

“It is Kreacher’s duty. Kreacher keeps it.”

“You keep it safe?”

“Kreacher keeps it.”

Sirius dragged Greg and Harry down to the kitchen for chocolate, conversation, and a fervent discussion of why Sirius’s house was so weird.

Chapter End Notes

The part that amuses me about this, that I hope you guys will share, is that it's an actual logical consequence that comes from Dumbledore not sharing information with his minions.
Ron and Hermione going to the prefect’s carriage on the train was really not pleasant at all. Harry also was really not used to the way Greg walked, just behind his shoulder on the left, but Ginny seemed to find it funny and was walking just behind his shoulder on the right. It made him feel like he was in a gangster movie.

They ended up squeezing in with Neville and Luna, who Harry hadn’t met. Neville was giving Greg a very odd look.

“He’s, er, had a row with his family,” Harry said quite awkwardly. “He stayed with me this summer.”

More or less.

Neville seemed to have no comment on this, and they fell into conversation with Luna, who was lovely. Being covered in Stinksap in front of Cho Chang was not.

Greg, apparently, thought Luna was lovely too.

“Would you like to go to Hogsmeade with me?” Greg asked her, a few hours into conversation and the train ride.

“That’s not a very funny joke,” she told him, blinking large eyes.

“It wasn’t a joke. I like your hair.”

She considered this, looking very vague.

“Well, if you like.”

Greg grinned.

“The girls on this side are much prettier,” he told Harry as an aside.

Harry stared at Greg in some bemusement. He was pretty sure they were friends, but sometimes Greg was just… still himself. Harry couldn’t get over the impression that Greg considered himself a minion on loan. Harry wasn’t even sure how you lent a person, but it seemed to help to consider Greg a very large, potentially violent house elf.

#

Draco and Crabbe stopped by to do some taunting, in classic form, with a nice half-veiled reference to Sirius.

Greg watched this with a blank, stolid expression. It was exactly the same as his normal expression, which Harry found frustrating. After the door had closed again, Harry tried, “Alright, Greg?”

Greg thought about it. He went on thinking about it so long that Harry had gotten diverted by Chocolate Frogs and general conversation for about half an hour before Greg said, “Luna. Could you read that out loud?”

“Which part?”
“Any part,” he said. “Draco always used to read things for me and Vince.”

All of a sudden, Harry put Draco’s gleeful, dramatic renditions of the news at mealtimes into the context of Greg and Vince not reading at all.

He wondered if in the Slytherin common room Draco did gleeful, dramatic renditions of textbooks, to hold their attention. It was as if the world shifted and realigned, and things suddenly made both more and less sense.

“Certainly,” Luna said solemnly. “I shall read you the true tale of Stubby Boardman.”

Hermione did not like Luna reading Greg the true tale of Stubby Boardman. (“He gets confused!”) Greg, on the other hand, seemed perfectly content sitting beside a tiny blond girl, listening to her read aloud.
Professor Snape swept directly past Harry’s silver-misted Draught of Peace, quite as if Harry didn’t exist. Harry didn’t look up at him. He had Defense to get through before he could come by and talk to his professor at their regular time on Tuesday. He wasn’t stupid enough to think that Professor Snape would say anything honest with witnesses.

#

Being assigned a dream diary by Professor Trelawney was a nasty shock. Harry considered it all the way to Defense, at which point he decided he was going to copy down one of his month of dreams from a few years ago, when his nightmares were at least a little less predictable. His graveyard dreams could stay where they were, safely in the privacy of his head and his real dream diary.

#

“I do not have time to hold your hand this year, Potter,” Professor Snape said when Harry turned Monday evening after dinner. It wasn’t their usual night, which was Tuesday, but apparently Harry had detention tomorrow. Professor Snape was minding four cauldrons. “Be concise.”

“I have detention tomorrow, so I thought I’d come by tonight instead. Well, every night this week. But tomorrow night I was going to come by to talk to you.”

“Your capacity for misdemeanor continues to astound me.”

“Professor Umbridge is a—” Harry cut himself off. “We had a disagreement about current events.”

“If you started preaching about current events in my class, Potter, you would have more problems than a week’s detention.”

Harry thought this was very unfair. He was still seething about this when Professor Snape continued.

“There’s grading to do on the front desk. Have at it, if you please.”

“Sometimes I think you’ll manage to drain the art and majesty right out of studying potions,” Harry commented, taking a seat and sharpening his quill, trying to make his shoulders unclench.

“Do you.”

“Then I get back to work, sir.”

“Get back to work, Potter.”

Harry got on with the grading, which was exactly the same as last year except this year he had piles from grades one through four of the summer homework, instead of grades one through three. Harry’s notes weren’t as pithy as Professor Snape’s, but he could at least tell who hadn’t done the reading, whose paper was too long or too short, and one group of three that had committed blatant plagiarism. He set those aside for Professor Snape, since he knew it’d cheer him up to tear them into tiny shreds.

He watched the potion Professor Snape was working on. He’d read about this one, he realized. Not that many potions used soot and pine needles and puffballs. This was liquid darkness. Professor Snape was toasting the sphinx oil over a small green flame, expression intent as its color slowly darkened from pale gold to tawny brown.
Harry felt a surge of affection, watching Professor Snape work, and spoke without thinking, “You always were a clever one, Severus.”

Both Harry and Snape froze, before Snape’s hands began moving again, salvaging his work with short, jerky motions.

“Thank you,” Snape said evenly, face averted and hidden behind dark hair. “On a different note, Potter… how goes your study of Occlumency?”

Poorly, whispered the amused voice in Harry’s mind.

“Professor,” Harry said very quietly.

“Perhaps you should go, Potter,” Snape continued in a near whisper. “I’m sure you have studying to do.”

Harry felt another surge of affection, and realized with dawning horror that it wasn’t his. It was possessive, dark, amused, Voldemort.

Pink elephants, pink elephants, pink elephants-

He heard Voldemort’s laughter, as he felt him sink hooks into the relevant memory.

I always have loved broken things, was the hissing comment.

Get OUT of my HEAD, Harry formed the thought as if it was a patronus, with all his will behind it.

Good night, Harry Potter. I trust you will sleep well.

And then Harry was alone in his own mind.

“…good night, sir,” Harry said numbly, and fled.

“Harry,” Snape said, as Harry was grabbing his things.

“Sir?”

“Take Dreamless Sleep tonight.”

Madame Pomfrey handed some over without argument, and Harry hurried back to his dorm, head aching fiercely.

“Say, Harry, can you help me with the paper on moonstones?” Ron asked. “I’ve got no clue, and Hermione’s busy policing Fred and George and working on a new speech for the house elves.”

“Can’t. Sorry, Ron,” Harry tried to edit that bit of bluntness, “I need to sleep. Like you were saying, I’ve been too crabby today.”

“Okay… night.”

Harry hated Ron’s expression, but he hated having Voldemort in his head a great deal more.

#

Did you know, Voldemort commented while Harry was sitting at lunch the next day eating beet soup. That imperfect Occlumency training makes the mind more vulnerable than the untrained
mind? I must commend Severus for that bit of cleverness.

Harry dropped his spoon into his soup, splashing the table. He mopped it up with his napkin.

“You alright, Harry?” asked Ron.

“Fine,” Harry said numbly.

Voldemort didn’t say anything else that day. Harry was still very distracted, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Really, though, what was he supposed to tell people. I’m really actually hearing voices? Voldemort talks to me in my head? It was bad enough when it was just a murderous basilisk whispering to him. This – this was much, much worse. He couldn’t even tell if Voldemort was always watching or only sometimes.

Ron and Hermione probably didn’t deserve how often he jumped and snapped at them.

Then Harry made the mistake of thinking about telling Professor Dumbledore. He wasn’t sure if the headache was him cringing at the idea or something from outside his mind, but either way it ate up his whole afternoon. Harry was certain he’d managed to get to Care of Magical Creatures and Herbology, but he remembered absolutely nothing about it. He mostly said ‘that’s nice’ to everyone who tried to talk to him. No one seemed to notice anything too odd. It was nice they couldn’t see that he felt like his head was going to fall off.

Voldemort, Harry thought waspishly, Master of the world, lord of headaches.

Which upgraded his headache from a nasty ache behind his eyes to a stabbing pain up by his temple. Harry tried not to breath, on the theory it might help.

It did not help.

Right, he thought, and tried to occlude. Think about the snitch, Harry, Heights. Think about heights.

Harry had taken to carrying candy around instead of a headache potion, and he was deeply regretting it right at the moment. He had detention every night this week during his normal potion brewing time, and piles more homework than usual. He really didn’t want to ask Madame Pomfrey for anything, and Snape… no.

No.

#

It turned out going ‘that’s nice’ to Angelina when she came to yell at him about Quidditch was not the best plan Harry had ever had. It just made his head echo in the most disconcerting fashion, and he hadn’t even properly heard what she was yelling about, and basically, Harry was pretty sure he’d been kicked off the Quidditch team.

He’d have to do something about that. In his copious free time.

Harry wanted to be back home with Sirius, breaking plates into tiny satisfying pieces. Trying to set that bloody locket on fire again-

And what was that burst of foreign interest? What did Voldemort care about a stupid piece of indestructible evil jewelry? Sirius had hundreds of things just like it, weird evil trinkets drenched in
human blood or made of bone or some such rot.

Argh.

#

Having Voldemort lurking in your head with a mood of quiet interest while your Defense professor
watches you cut your hand open over and over was really something special. Why was every wizard
Harry met such a sadist?

Harry fell asleep thinking, *I'm going to have to do something about this.* He was pretty sure he was
alone in his own head. Pretty sure.
The rest of Harry’s week was similarly awful, though Voldemort did not narrate it any further. Harry’s essay on moonstones really wasn’t. Harry wrote out an irritable bullet pointed list with a PS, instead, at about one in the morning.

*If you had any spare headache or wound-healing potions, I’d rather not bother Madame Pomfrey.*

“This is not so much an essay as a cry for help, Potter,” Professor Snape said, staring at it. “Detention, Saturday at 2.”

Since Harry’s usual tutoring session with Professor Snape was on Saturday at 2, this mostly made him feel like Professor Snape was a wonderful, understanding teacher.

Harry was aware he was basically hallucinating, since Professor Snape could never be described with those words in that order by anyone sane.

Harry got the copy of *Mind Magicks* out from the library again, and started reading again from the beginning.

He got to the part about pain lowering mental barriers and wanted to laugh. So, he had to keep his mental barriers up, avoiding pain, stress, strong emotion, and sleep.

That should be easy.

#

Draco and Crabbe – Malfoy and Crabbe – seemed to actually be worse this year than they had been in third year, before Malfoy had taken the hiatus from being a git. The whole Slytherin House seemed to be moving as a herd, with one mind and one voice (usually Draco’s). Greg was the only obvious exception. He was hanging out with the Ravenclaws as some sort of strange mascot.

#

Hermione’s idea to talk to Professor Dumbledore about Umbridge was not helpful. The thought of talking to Professor Dumbledore at this point made Harry flinch, not just because he was angry with the man but because he had a sneaking suspicion that Professor Dumbledore was right and Harry was letting the side down somehow. Being a security risk. He was glad they hadn’t told him more about the secret weapon.

At least a few of his blood-flavored cherry candies made his hand heal over okay. Professor Umbridge was *not* helping Harry’s plan to avoid pain, stress, and strong emotion. She was probably best friends with Lucius Malfoy.

#

Harry wrote to Sirius on Saturday morning.

*Dear Snuffles,*

*Things here are a little awful. I hope you are finding lots of things to break there. The new Defense professor doesn’t think spells are worth casting, so I’m going quietly mad.*

*I actually thought Professor Snape was a wonderful, understanding teacher today. Don’t worry, I*
lay down until it went away.

Give my best to kitten. Greg has been following a blonde Ravenclaw around all week. Her name’s Luna. She reads him articles from the Quibbler and he carries her books and holds doors and her chair. I still really don’t understand him.

Honestly I’m mostly realizing how much homework I have this year in how many classes. Going to try to learn some extra stuff with Hermione. Ron tried out for the Quidditch team. I thought I’d been kicked off after yelling at the captain, but she was quite decent about it afterwards.

-Harry

#

Harry and Professor Snape didn’t talk on Saturday afternoon during Potions tutoring. They worked quietly, in concert, from written instructions Snape left on the counter. It was, more than anything, boring – preparing ingredients for Potions classes for the next week, grading homework from early years, minding potions that took months to brew. Snape never looked directly at Harry, and Harry couldn’t blame him. Harry was avoiding mirrors, himself.

Harry breathed evenly and thought about nothing at all.

At the end of the lesson, Professor Snape said, “If you can keep yourself out of detention through Tuesday, I wish to see you replicate that cleaning potion of yours.”

“Yes, professor,” Harry said.

#

Dear Harry,

I’m glad to hear I’m not the only one going quietly mad. This place is really only tolerable when you’re here.

We should figure out our next grand adventure, and you should let me know what these extra classes are you’re taking. Not more Potions, I hope – I can mostly deal with you being a Potions nerd, but spare my poor old heart. I mean, I’m not worried about losing that fight, I’m much more handsome, charismatic, fun, and adventurous than he is.

I’m no good at this being adult and treating you like a little kid thing. You came fully grown, I skipped all the embarrassing bits that would lead me to lose all respect for you because you can’t tie your own shoes. I don’t like being so far away from the fight right now.

Don’t you dare quote me to me, Harry. I’m thinking about what you’ll say in response to my letter and it’s not on. We’ll talk soon. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.

Snuffles

Harry felt a rush of affection, loneliness, worry, anger, fear, all sorts of things, on reading his new letter.

Is it a product of a Dumbledore education that produces this love of absurd codenames? Voldemort inquired politely.

Harry was sitting in the Gryffindor common room. It was a nice sunny day outside. Warm. He felt
very cold.

*It’s polite to answer questions when they are asked, Harry.*

*I’m really not interested in having a CHAT. Murderer.*

Right, Harry thought. His mistake was having feelings. He’d read his letter, and he’d felt strongly about Sirius. Strong emotions, low occlumency barriers. He’d be fine, just as soon as he stopped worrying about Sirius.

*I’m looking for him, you know.*

That. That was not helping.

“Harry? Something wrong with your letter?” asked Ron.

“Ah- my scar,” Harry said, trying to keep his voice down. “Hurting.”

“Mate, maybe you should talk to someone about that. Madame Pomfrey or Professor Dumbledore or something,”

Harry winced at the burst of pain and anger. He rubbed a hand over his face.

“I already talked to Madame Pomfrey. And I’ve got some potions.”

Speaking of, he dug out a headache potion and swallowed it.

*You are a curious boy,* commented Voldemort. *Tell me, would you be interested in a standard offer of wealth and power?*

Harry swallowed the laugh. This was not an appropriate time for laughter. Voldemort was not funny. Murderer, Harry reminded himself firmly.

“Everything okay with Snuffles?” Ron asked, because Harry was having too many conversations right now.

“He’s just bored. Everyone’s so busy keeping him out of trouble, you know? Like he wasn’t bored enough in, um, the kennel.”

“Well… what’d he say about your scar hurting? You told him, didn’t you?”

“He said to trust Dumbledore,” Harry lied, because that seemed like the sort of thing Sirius would say if Sirius were the sort of parent Molly Weasley would approve of.

Not that Sirius was his parent. That wasn’t – no. Godfather. Like Sirius had said, Harry was basically grown up, and like Remus said, Sirius got confused sometimes. More like – generationally removed brothers. Except they couldn’t tell Mrs. Weasley that. She’d think Harry was confused, and Harry was not crazy.

*Of course you’re not crazy,* Voldemort said in a reassuring tone.

Voldemort, Harry thought distantly, had horribly effective dramatic timing.

Harry glanced around the room for inspiration and caught sight of Ginny. Right. She’d dealt with Voldemort’s younger self for a whole year and managed not to murder anyone or die, and that was
with a piece of Voldemort that had nothing else to do except suck her life out and drive her to murder.

Harry took a calming breath. Having a plan helped. He gathered the feel of flying around him, the smooth wood of the broom….

“Harry?” Ron said cautiously.

“Oh.” Harry blinked his eyes open. “Sorry, I zoned out on you there, didn’t I?”

“You look tired, mate.”

“Yeah. I think I’ll go flying, though, clear my head. Want to come?”

Ron did want to come.
“Ginny,” Harry said later, after flying himself into comfortable exhaustion, “Would you like to take a walk with me?”

“Sure, Harry,” she said in rather a high voice.

As they left the Gryffindor common room, Harry heard Lavender resume talking excitedly to someone.

Harry aimed their walk vaguely down towards the main entrance, feeling itchy and uncomfortable without….

“Do you know where anyone goes in this school for privacy?” Harry asked abruptly.

Ginny squeaked.

Harry looked at her blankly.

“The astronomy tower,” Ginny told him. “This way.”

Slightly bemused, Harry followed her. She seemed to know where she was going, at least. And the view from the Astronomy tower was quite nice.

“So,” she said, leaning against a wall and looking out over the lawn and the forest. “What did you want to talk about, Harry?”

“Well. Voldemort.”

She turned and smiled at him.

“Music to my ears. Do you know how frustrating it is to be kept out of it?”

“Yeah,” he said, grinning tiredly. “A bit.”

Somehow, this turned into filling Ginny in, more or less, on most of what they suspected Voldemort was up to. Secret weapon and all. He didn’t talk about the Order, because he wasn’t completely stupid.

“And one more thing,” he said. The sun was setting and curfew would be any minute, but Harry couldn’t bring himself to care. Being up high was almost like flying.

“Harry,” Ginny said with some affection, “If you don’t get to the point I’m kicking you off the edge of this tower.”

Harry laughed, startled.

“Okay. You know how the papers are always going on about how I’m going mad and hearing voices and that?”

“Yes,” she said with a snort.

“They’re a tiny bit right,” Harry said, looking out at the bright orange sunset. “Well. One voice. I wanted to ask your advice on dealing with him.”
Ginny was silent for a while.

“You think you’re being possessed?” she asked quietly.

“No! No, he just – we can just talk, I don’t know why. It’s as if he’s in the same room, sometimes. I’m working on it – blocking my mind – but it’s like bailing a boat out when the shark’s already in the boat, it’s distracting.”

Ginny snorted.

“You know I never did anything heroic like fight him off or anything. You had to rescue me.”

“Would have happened to anyone,” Harry said sturdily.

“But it happened to me.”

Harry felt abruptly very awkward.

“Things without feelings, or fun things. Things he doesn’t understand. Like… makeup, and Quidditch, and girly magazines,” she said after a long few moments.

Harry tried to visualize developing an interest in girly magazines.

“Quidditch I can do.”

“Come on, Harry. We need to go to bed, we’ll get detention.”

The sun had thoroughly set, now.

Ginny interwove their fingers to lead him down the stairs, and kissed his cheek at the entrance to Gryffindor Tower.

“Thanks for talking to me, Harry,” she said with a mysterious sort of smile.

Harry fell into bed, puzzled but optimistic.

#

Monday morning at Potions, after Umbridge was appointed High Inquisitor, Draco leaned over and asked in a friendly, inquiring tone, “So, Potter. How do you get your hair to do that?”

“Do what?”

“Look like you could double as a barn roof, of course.”

“It’s just my hair, Malfoy.”

“But surely you must do something with it. There are hair potions, you know.”

“I don’t use hair potions, Malfoy.”

“I took the liberty of borrowing this for you,” Draco said solemnly, and handed over a copy of Witch Weekly. “It has a good article on short hair styles, Pansy tells me.”

Harry stared blankly at the girly magazine in his hands, and looked up into Draco’s flat, pale eyes.

“You were lurking around the Astronomy Tower.”
Draco grinned.

“Everyone’s talking about your date, you know. Miss Weasley is quite the lucky girl. There was a theory that you were simply a confirmed bachelor, but as it turns out the game is on… well. Good luck.”

“Date,” Harry repeated.

“Does Weasley know you’re spending time in the Astronomy Tower with his precious baby sister?” Draco asked.

Harry shot a horrified look at Ron. The horrible part, he realized, was he wouldn’t be able to admit what they were actually talking about. Not without sounding exceptionally crazy.

Date.

Oh, Merlin.

“Weasley,” Draco said, raising his voice a little, “Did you know Potter took your little sister to the Astronomy Tower last night?”

Ron turned to stare at Harry. Harry stared back, mouth open.

Crabbe bumped into Harry as he made his way back to his own desk, and Harry looked at him, and then down at his own potion.

Which instead of blue, was a roiling grey-green, giving off black smoke. What could have caused that….

“Professor!” Harry yelped, seeing that Ron’s was the same awful green. “Doxy eggs, I think these are going to explode—"

”Protego—“ Snape bellowed, and the desk and both cauldrons disappeared in a billow of flame inside a shimmering silvery sphere.

Harry took a couple steps back.

“Does someone have an explanation for this?” Professor Snape asked softly.

“Potter and Weasley were distracted from their potions arguing about Potter’s new girlfriend, Professor,” Draco explained earnestly. “Potter was talking about hair care because he worries he’s not pretty enough, sir.”

“That’s not true!” cried Hermione. “Crabbe put doxy eggs in their potions, I saw him.”

“Five points from Gryffindor for maligning a classmate, Granger. Potter, Weasley, twenty points each for inattention and destruction of school property, and detention, I think. Tomorrow night.”

“That’s not fair,” continued Hermione. Harry was just staring at the place his workbench had been. That explosion was strong enough it could have hurt a lot of people, not just him and Ron. Who added doxy eggs to strengthening solution? That was just….

Vincent Crabbe, apparently.

“Another five points from Gryffindor for cheek, Miss Granger. Would you like to join your friends in detention?”
Hermione subsided, and class went on. Harry would miss that cauldron.

Fred and George found out about the ‘argument’ at lunch time because Ron and Harry were busy having the argument. Ron used the phrase ‘baby sister.’ Harry wanted to die.

Fred and George took Harry by the shoulders and cornered him just outside the great hall, bracketing him on both sides.

“So, what’s the real story?” Fred asked.

“We’re nicer than Ron, partner. You can trust us.”

“I don’t know! Ginny just. I just. I didn’t mean.”

“Oh, dear,” said Fred. “It sounds like no one’s ever explained the facts of life to the poor boy. Tell me, Harry, how much do you know about wizard courting customs?”

“Er.”

“You have to be careful about touching her or you’ll end up betrothed,” George added helpfully.

“Too much eye contact is a no-no, you can get married that way.”

“That’s if you say her name three times in a row, George.”

“Oh, right, Fred, I forgot.”

“And of course you need the Ministry’s permission to get married.”

“So in conclusion,” they said in unison, “It’d be safer to stay three rooms away.”

Harry glared at them both in equal measure as they broke down laughing. He got two arms slung around his shoulders.

“Seriously, Harry,” Fred confided. “She’s a bit of a dragon. Be careful, yeah?”


“Fred? George?” asked Ginny from just behind them.

They swiveled in unison.

“Yes, sister dearest?”

“Run.”

Fred and George bolted, Ginny hard on their heels. Harry ran a harried hand through his hair, and raced to get to divination on time.
“Yeah, Quirrell was a great teacher,” said Harry loudly, “There was just that minor drawback of him having Lord Voldemort sticking out of the back of his head.”

This pronouncement was followed by one of the loudest silences Harry had ever heard. Then--

“I think another week's detentions would do you some good, Mr. Potter,” said Umbridge sleekly.

“I already have detention with Professor Snape tomorrow night, Professor,” Harry said.

“Then you will serve detention on Saturday afternoon, as well.”

“I’ve got detention with Professor Snape then too,” Harry said hurriedly.

“What have you been doing in Potions class, Mister Potter?” she asked with a little giggle.

“Blew up a cauldron,” Harry said shortly.

“Monday will do, then, Mister Potter.”

Harry had no comment.

#

At dinner that night Ron was loudly not talking to Harry, but Hermione was and shared her concerns in hurried whispers.

“You and Ron could really have been hurt this afternoon, Harry,” she said quietly. “I know Draco was pretending to be our friend last year, but you can’t let your guard down around him anymore. He signaled Crabbe to put those eggs in your cauldrons, you know.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve been watching him, in the Map,” she confirmed. “He goes all over the school at all hours, I think he’s made some sort of deal with Mrs. Norris. I think he’s spying.”

For whom rather went without saying. Harry shot a wary look at the Slytherin table, where everyone seemed very happy about something.

#

Harry’s evening detention with Umbridge was made complete by it catching Voldemort’s attention.

*I wasn’t aware you were a masochist, Harry,* Voldemort said after watching for about ten minutes, as they both watched blood drip from the cut on the back of Harry’s hand.

*I’m not.*

*She just wants you to beg for mercy.*

*I won’t.*

*Everyone can be broken, dear child.*
With that, Harry felt himself alone in his own mind. Which was better, for a value of better. He thought he was getting better at being able to sense when Voldemort was lurking, too, which had to be good.

Harry managed to get himself another night’s detention on Tuesday afternoon, bringing him up to Tuesday of the following week. Harry was getting a sinking feeling about this. Lovely as having Professor Umbridge to take his temper out on was, he should probably do something about it. And since he couldn’t very well drug her…. Harry did still have some of the calming chocolates he’d made at Number 12. Surely he could get through classes with her and detentions with her without too much emotional upset if he was drugged first.

#

“Very well, Mister Potter,” Professor Snape said in his classroom Tuesday after dinner. “You will be recreating your scrubbing bubbles potion tonight. Proceed.”

And Professor Snape sat down and watched Harry work with fixed and focused attention, and it was right up there with some of Harry’s worst nightmares. Especially since he could feel Voldemort’s attention as a cool, scaly sensation in his head.

Harry was in the midst of grinding his myrtle leaves when Professor Snape said, “What are you doing?”

“Grinding myrtle leaves, Professor.”

“Those are fresh.”

“The recipe doesn’t specify.”

“No one with any sense would grind fresh myrtle leaves, Potter. Fresh leaves are not crushed before adding them to a potion.”

“This is what I did, Professor.”

Professor Snape’s nostrils flared, but he gestured Harry to proceed. Harry continued his brewing, trying to tune out everything but his potion, including the increased pain in his scar. Finally, his potion gleaming a pale yellow, he tapped the side of the cauldron three times with his wand, focusing his magic on movement, activity, cleaning, cheer.

“What was that?” Professor Snape asked sharply.

“I tapped the side of the cauldron three times. The instructions do say-“

“That was not tapping. That was broad swishes of your wand, as if you were charming.”

Professor Snape scowled at him. Harry looked blankly back, and checked his potion. It had turned the appropriate milky-pearly white the directions indicated was finished.

“Bottle it, and we will see if the effect has been replicated.”

Harry did as he was told, ignoring his audience, and shortly was pouring a stream of white soapsuds back out of its glass flask.

It blinked open green eyes and blew bubbles at him with a birdlike chirp.

“You are making me very angry, Potter,” Professor Snape said, staring at it blankly.
“Well, I don’t know either,” Harry said. “I just followed the instructions, I always tap my cauldron like that, it’s not as if I was doing it on purpose.”

You angled the strokes of your wand from the left, the center, and then the right, Voldemort observed. Creating the rune for life, algiz. Myrtle is also a strong symbol of life and fire, especially Myrica rubra, waxberry, which is what you used.

…

“You just realized something,” Professor Snape said. “Spit it out.”

“More like it… came to me,” Harry said. He had no idea what his expression was like.

“I don’t care if dancing elephants delivered it in a dream, Potter,” Snape hissed.

“Algiz,” Harry blurted. “And waxberry. If that makes any sense. Please say that doesn’t make any sense.”

Professor Snape looked very blank.

I am not wrong, Voldemort informed Harry. Potions may not be my strongest area, but I am capable of following a simple correspondence to its natural conclusion.

Voldemort, Harry realized with a strange floating sensation, was a nerd.

The potion with green eyes chirped at them both, drawing their attention to where it was trying to slide under the door of the potions ingredients cupboard. The floor, Harry noticed, was very shiny.

“How do you corral the thing,” Snape said flatly.

“Here, um, Bubbles! Come, Bubbles. You can stay in your nice quiet bottle for a little while and then I’ll take you to the entrance hall for nice outdoor dirt.”

Harry put the bottle down sideways on the floor, and the pile of soapsuds poured itself back into the tiny bottle in a way that did not seem physically probable.

I can think of absolutely no martial applications for this, Voldemort mused. Do ask Severus if he can. He’s quite creative.

“I’m not asking Professor Snape questions for you,” Harry said shortly aloud. “This isn’t your detention, is it. Don’t you have people to murder?”

He put the stopper back on the flask firmly.

I am done for the evening, and I was curious about your potion.

“You told him about Kitten?” Harry asked Professor Snape, aware he was being irrationally angry.

“It is hardly a state secret, boy!”

“She’s an innocent – thing!”

“She’s not even alive.”

“I’m pretty sure she is! More or less! I was thinking pretty hard about life, anyway.”
As with a patronus charm, when one concentrates on happiness, Voldemort observes.

“Like he said, like a Patronus charm,” Harry continued ranting.

“You,” Professor Snape said in a distant voice, “Are a very disturbing child. Hush, please, and let me think.”

“He wants to know if you can think of any martial applications,” Harry added nastily.

“Only if we could defeat our enemies through the power of shiny floors,” Snape snapped back.

*Temper*, Voldemort murmured.

Harry sat down abruptly on a stool, closing his eyes and counting to ten slowly, rubbing his temples. Professor Snape seemed willing to give him some time.

“There is something really wrong with everything about this,” Harry observed aloud after a minute.

Professor Snape said nothing.

“Is it awful of me that I really want to try some other myrtle and tapping recipes to see if we can replicate the effect?” Harry asked.

“Probably,” Professor Snape allowed. “I am not likely to be a good influence on a developing mind.”

Harry nodded agreeably.

“There is,” Professor Snape said with a nasty glint of humor in his eye, “A haircare potion that comes to mind.”

“Oh, Merlin’s balls.”

“Five points from Gryffindor for language, Mister Potter.”

Somehow, they ended up making the haircare potion together, Professor Snape grinding the myrtle viciously and doing the tapping himself at the end of the brewing. Harry played assistant, prepping ingredients and passing them to him as they were needed.

“…if this works, Potter, I shall have to have you write a paper for publication,” Professor Snape said, holding the bottle of viscous green liquid up to the light.

“Ngh.” It was coming up on midnight, at this point, and Harry’s head hurt.

Professor Snape poured the green potion out onto the table, where it oozed. Slowly, the ooze formed into a slime-green ball.

Black eyes blinked open, with catslit pupils. It hissed, from a new mouth with fangs, and launched itself at Professor Snape’s head.

Harry had just drawn his wand to attack it somehow – he had no idea what charm you used on a rogue hair care product trying to eat your professor’s head – when it slid slowly off of him again, bouncing back to the tabletop via the floor.

Professor Snape was still visibly himself, with his sallow expression and terrible nose, but his hair was glossy black, slightly wavy, looking like it had just stepped out of a magazine. Harry stared.
Then Harry took a haircare potion to the face, and was too busy flailing to goggle for a minute. He scrabbled with it, because *air*, and eventually peeled it away from his head, taking deep, heaving breaths.

The potion bounced rhymically on the table, a gentle green ball again.

Snape flicked his wand, and handed Harry a conjured mirror after looking into it for a moment. Harry’s hair was lying calmly, and he looked glossy too. Harry blinked owlishly at himself.

Voldemort’s eerie high-pitched laugh echoed in his head for a very long time.
Harry Develops a Routine

Harry dreamed that night about long corridors and locked doors. On the third repetition, he said aloud, “I’m a lucid dreamer, you know. It’s a nice change from nightmares about you murdering people, but I know this isn’t mine.”

There was suddenly a giant snake in his dream. Harry hissed at it disagreeably. There was something very soothing about swearing in snake. It was a language made for swearing.

*Children*, the snake hissed. *Allergic to subtlety.*

“Slytherins think every stupid thing they think of is better because they’re subtle about it.”

*You stand there and insult me? You think that wise?*

“Haven’t yet met a bully it was smarter not to stand up to. It is my mind, anyway. I don’t have to be nice to trespassers.”

*You are very blunt when you’re asleep.*

“I’m pretty blunt when I’m awake, too.”

*Very well. I shall dispense with subtlety.*

Harry woke up, staring at the dark curtains above his bed. He didn’t think that dream had gone well at all.

#

Professor Snape was in exceptional form the next morning at breakfast, glaring at all and sundry. This was, perhaps, because all and sundry were *staring* at him and his glorious locks, which were still glorious in morning light. His hair was almost *curly*, and the glossy black had faint blue highlights.

People kept glancing at Harry and doing a double-take, too. Harry wasn’t sure if it was flattering or if he should be hiding his head in a bag.

“Potter,” said Draco Malfoy, with Crabbe and Nott looming behind him. “What did you do to Professor Snape.”

The entire Gryffindor and half the Hufflepuff table leaned closer to hear. Harry resisted the urge to hide under the table.

“There was a Potions accident last night,” Harry said, and cleared his throat. “It doesn’t look that weird, does it?”

“No, Potter,” Draco said with quiet, delighted sarcasm. “You look lovely. All the girls will line up and you will have to beat them off with sticks.”

Harry glanced at Ron, who appeared to be no help at all, and Hermione, who asked, “What potion was it?”

“Hair potion,” Harry muttered.
“What was that, Potter?” Draco caroled. “I can’t quite hear you.”

“I said I made a hair potion, Malfoy!” Harry yelled.

Then Harry remembered he was in the middle of the great hall, and settled back into his seat.

Draco wandered back to the Slytherin table, laughing and chattering to his friends.

Right, Harry thought. New plan. Get the hair potion from Professor Snape. Set it on Malfoy. Hope it eats him.

Professor Snape did not go along with this plan.

#

The whole school gossiped for days about what had happened to Professor Snape’s hair, but Harry refused to go into detail. Professor Snape assigned him background reading on the terrible things that happened to researchers who let their discoveries be stolen. A whole anthology of ‘and he died, depressed and alone, while someone else got all his fame, glory, and friends’ was not a subtle hint.

Finally, Harry’s fifth year began to fall into a routine. He had his regular classes during the day, Quidditch practice twice a week, and Potions ‘detentions’ twice a week on one flimsy excuse or another. Harry had too much homework, too little time to sleep, and everyone thought he had a girlfriend.

“I’ll tell them to knock it off,” Ginny offered, as they were taking a walk in the blustery September weather one Saturday. “If you want.”

“It’s alright,” Harry said. “I don’t know how else we’d explain it. I don’t want anyone to know.”

Ginny squeezed his hand, but didn’t comment on that.

“I always found him very charming,” she said. “He was always very kind. Except he was sort of mean, in a funny way – he could make fun of anything and make you laugh, even if you knew he was being mean.”

“I think I know what you mean,” Harry allowed.

“The only way I found not to get turned around was to not talk to him.”

“I’m doing my best. It’s not like I’m interested.” He paused. “Even if I do think it could be useful somehow, to spy.”

“...he’s not there now, is he?”

“I can tell,” Harry promised. “If he’s around, I’ll ask you about how you do your hair. Malfoy’s idea, the git.”

“You did do something different with your hair last week,” she said.

“I was attacked by a rampaging hair care potion,” Harry said solemnly.

“And so was Professor Snape?”

“They’re very vicious, hair care potions. Like little white rabbits.”
“Rabbits?”

“Muggle joke. It’s from a movie about King Arthur.”

“Was Merlin in it?”

“No, actually. I don’t know where he was. Maybe he had too much dignity to sing the songs.”

Which was how Harry and the other muggleborn Gryffindors ended up attempting to explain Monty Python to a mystified set of wizard kids, but that’s another story.

The part of Harry’s new fifth year routine that he was having the hardest time with was the fact that Voldemort tuned into his extra potions lessons as if they were a twice weekly showing of a telly show he liked. He was mostly content to watch, and Harry tried to keep his mind clear and mostly failed, because Potions required thought, not automatic reflex and perfect focus. At least when Harry did it. Professor Snape seemed to honestly expect Harry to produce a monograph on animate potion-making and the use of runic symbology and myrtle and intention to influence potion behavior.

“Professor,” Harry tried to say, “I really don’t have time to-“

“If we are discussing what you have time for, we will discuss how long you expect to putter around on a broomstick when any chance you have of achieving potions mastery depends on focus.”

Harry glared at him.

“Are we discussing your timekeeping, Potter?”

“No, sir.”

“I suspected as much.”

Fred and George were kind enough to make Harry extra Calming Chocolates, Cherry Band-aids, Sunny Lemons (with a successful cheering center surrounded by hard lemon candy), and the whole range of sweets in Harry’s roster – the newest being caramels good for headaches. The cherry ones even tasted, shockingly, like cherries – Harry was still getting used to that. After the third explosive failure of his undetectable extension charms on his many extra robe pockets, Harry groveled to Hermione until she redid them to a reasonable fashionable standard. At which point it became much more manageable to have a lot of different candies constantly on hand.

One pocket had a single dose of Polyjuice in it and a crystal vial with one of Draco’s hairs. (Draco had given him quite a look after he grabbed it during Care of Magical Creatures with a breezy, “Just looking at how you do your hair care, Malfoy!”) It wasn’t that Harry could think of a reason this would be useful, but more than he couldn’t think of a reason not to carry around a spare dose of Polyjuice, healing potion, and headache potion. It was, he thought while transferring all of his ridiculous bits and pieces from one set of pockets to the pockets in his next clean robe, probably some kind of sign of being anxious. But at least he was in good stead – look how many pockets Hagrid had, after all.

He missed Hagrid.

Harry’s sanity was helped by his patchy successes with Occlumency and the fact that Voldemort actually was busy with other things besides stalking him in his mind. Outside of potions lessons, Voldemort seemed to check in when Harry felt a strong emotion or at odd moments, which seemed
to correspond to nothing in Harry’s life that Harry could see. Harry was usually in class, doing homework, flying, sleeping, or reading horrible accounts of potions researchers’ early deaths in poverty and squalor.

Voldemort actually stuck around in his mind to read about the potions researchers’ early deaths in poverty and squalor.

*You read very slowly*, he observed to Harry.

*I’m not 80 years old and used to calligraphy.*

*Turn the page, I want to see if he gets eaten by his cats.*

*Freak*, Harry thought, and then had a pang of guilt. There were a lot of insults he’d throw at someone, but he truly hated that one.

Harry’s scar flashed with pain, but Voldemort seemed to have no further comment. After a moment, Harry turned the page. Homework, he had long ago learned, didn’t wait for you to be safe before it needed to be completed.

Everyone else’s lives kept on going while Harry was busy narrowly avoiding a mental breakdown. Ron was busy with Quidditch, Neville with herbology. Hermione had decided her latest cause was House Elf literacy, which she was selling to the House Elves as a way to get more work and to her friends as the next step towards unionization. Greg continued to follow Luna around at every opportunity. Draco continued to do a really, really good impression of an evil little weasel.

Harry set Bubbles free in the entrance hall of the school and promptly lost him, only to find out he’d made fast friends with the headmaster and was following him everywhere trying his best to powerwash his robe.

Harry refused to be jealous of a pile of sentient soapsuds that he’d *made*, for Merlin’s sake.

He thought a lot about Hermione’s idea about starting a Defense club.

#

Harry got a letter from Sirius before the first Hogsmeade weekend that consisted entirely of an orderly list of ways he’d tried to smash, set fire to, melt, or otherwise destroy the locket. Harry got the impression it’d become a bit of a hobby.

*Kreacher says R wanted it smashed, too, which is one of the most sensible things I’ve ever heard R say. We’ve been rather bonding over the horrid thing, though he won’t let me keep it overnight. Seems to think I’ll steal it given the chance. Can you look up other methods of destruction in the Hogwarts library for me? I’m running out of ideas and books.*

Harry felt a flash of foreign *anger*, and said under his breath, “Oh, knock it off. It’s not your ugly amulet, is it.”

Harry paused, rewound what he just said, and said instead, “It is your ugly amulet. Right. I’m really going to enjoy when we finally figure out how to smash it.”

*That*, said Voldemort, cool with anger, *Is Salazar Slytherin’s locket, and an heirloom of my family. Your precious godfather’s brother stole it from me and died. A little respect, Harry, is not too much to ask.*
Harry thought about this.

“I don’t respect you at all,” he said, and focused as hard as he could on Quidditch statistics. Slamming a mental door in Voldemort’s face might be petty, but it was still satisfying.

“You’re, um, talking to yourself,” said Ron, very awkwardly.

“I was reading Sirius’ letter,” Harry said, thinking quickly. “And then I was angry about everything and was yelling at Voldemort in my head. I’ve started doing that sometimes.”

“Might want to keep it inside your head,” Ron advised. “Don’t need to give people ammunition for more articles.”

Harry smiled.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

And then Harry changed the subject.

There were a few times when Harry just repeated how much he hated Voldemort over and over, and a few times when he swore inside his head as viciously as he knew how, but neither got any reaction, not even a stab of pain. Harry did not have such a disciplined mind that he could keep that up for more than a few minutes – he ended up thinking about his parents, or Quidditch, or potions, or homework. There was just a lot to life. Voldemort turning up in his mind to watch him eat mashed potatoes at dinner quickly became – normal.


Harry kept working on his Occlumency.
Harry kept up a constant stream of occlusion at the first meeting of his defense group at the Hog’s Head, which seemed to work. Or perhaps Voldemort was just busy murdering someone. Whatever worked, really. Greg, who followed Luna in, said nearly nothing at the meeting.

“If Luna says the Minister has an army of Heliopaths,” was his one contribution, “He’s got one.”

The entire group met his glower and mutually decided not to argue with him about it. Except for Hermione, who was stopped by Ginny from getting quite off track about it.

Harry was not sure how he felt about his not-quite-dating Ginny when he found out she’d been dating a boy named Michael Corner and now wasn’t, and when Hermione asked him what he thought of Cho looking at him.

Ginny, helpfully, told him that he shouldn’t worry, she was still seeing Michael – after all, it wasn’t as if they were at an age to be serious, were they? Harry wasn’t quite sure what he thought about that.

#

Hedwig coming back the Monday after Hogsmeade weekend with a hurried note from Ron’s mum not to do anything against school rules PLEASE did nothing to convince any of the children not to do anything against school rules, though it did convince all of them that owls were a terrible communication method.

Harry did not say that it seemed to him right now that every communication method was insecure. It seemed rather belaboring the point.

Draco was bragging before Potions about getting the Slytherin Quidditch team reinstated, and Harry held Neville back from attacking him after a nasty dig about St Mungo’s. Then Umbridge turned up in Potions class, and Harry spent the entire class fantasizing about how he could turn his potion into a caustic poison and throw it at her.

“Professor?” Harry asked after Potions class on Monday, eyeing the door and keeping his voice down.

“Potter.”

“I know you said the only time I could threaten muggles was if my life was in danger. What about threatening teachers?”

Professor Snape gave him an even look. Harry stuck his hands in his pockets.

“Which teacher?” Professor Snape asked.

“Professor Umbridge.”

“Never give a wizard or witch warning before you strike, Potter.”

“She already knows I hate her.”

“If I were in the habit of giving you advice, Potter, I would by necessity make sure you knew what to do with a young witch you are leading out after curfew.”
Harry stared at him in horror.

“As with all health concerns, you should discuss it with Madame Pomfrey.”

Professor Snape knew precisely how to kill a conversation.

# At lunch, Harry passed Draco a folded note.

*Can’t punch you this year, but will come up with something creative next time you talk about mad people. PS. You’re lucky this note isn’t soaked in poison. I’m getting quite good at them. PPS. I hope you’re very angry about Greg and Luna. I think they’re cute.*

*Dearest Harry,*

*I know you want to copy my poise and hair, but please stop sending me love notes in the middle of lunch. People will get the wrong idea.*

*Hearts,*

*Draco*

Harry was almost certain Draco was mocking him, but there was an edge of flirtation there that was making Harry very confused, and rather off balance.

#

*Dear Snuffles,*

*Enclosed is my list of methods from the library. Hermione helped. I thought about asking permission to look in the restricted section, but I don’t think that would be appropriate for young minds. Our new professor is very careful about children.*

*I’ve been thinking about starting a club, once I get the proper permissions. You know how important school rules are. It’ll be a little busy with Quidditch, and Snape’s been giving me detention a lot.*

*I made Kitten a brother, and now I have to write extra lines about my mistakes. As for other extra lessons, haven’t had time for many of them.*

*Harry*

*PS. Hermione’s been studying communication methods. Ron’s mum worries with him away so much. Any research ideas appreciated.*

Harry had Quidditch instead of Potions that Tuesday, and ended up admitting to Ron that his scar hurt when Voldemort was angry. He fell asleep in the common room to the lull of Potions ingredients lists, and woke up in the night to Dobby.

#

*At breakfast, Harry lobbed another mildly enchanted paper airplane at Draco’s head.*

*How’s this for a love note? I’ve found someplace for us to duel. You’d have to swear to keep it a secret.*
He got no immediate reply.

Hermione, Harry noticed, seemed to treat Dumbledore as a sort of magic keyword to everything being okay. Harry wasn’t quite sure when he’d stopped doing that. Had he ever trusted the man, or did he still trust him? Maybe Harry was just no good at trusting people. He was certainly keeping enough secrets lately. There seemed to be no one who knew everything he was doing. It was probably the creeping Slytherin influence, he thought bitterly.

He lifted his chin and looked at Hermione.

“Professor Snape has me working on a monograph,” he said firmly. “About how I made Kitten by accident and another one called Bubbles, and a hair potion creature that attacked us and doesn’t have a name. It’s absurd and he says I’m not allowed to talk about research, but I’m going to try to keep fewer secrets.”

Harry got a hug out of this declaration, and then Hermione wanted to know all about where and how the monograph would be published, and had Harry made a first draft, and Harry grinned and tried to answer and mostly failed. He did tell her a couple stories about researchers who shared their research and died alone, though, and she promised to read the book and not ask too many questions – “But you must let me proofread it for you, Harry!”

The first meeting of the DA, after that, just made Harry feel better about life. There were an odd number of them, which meant Hermione could fight Greg while Ron practiced with Neville. No one even considered pairing Neville and Greg – Greg still made Neville turn pale whenever Greg looked at him. Harry didn’t really want to know what Greg had done to get that reaction.

Harry fell asleep that night feeling like he’d accomplished something.

#

Harry was not amused by Professor Snape hounding him about his monograph in the week leading up to the Slytherin/Gryffindor game. Professor Snape was not amused by Harry prioritizing Quidditch.

“I’m shelling snails,” Harry said abruptly. “You’ll need them for next week, and I don’t have time for this.”

Professor Snape’s eyebrows went up, but he didn’t argue.

Harry shelled the snails rather viciously.

Why is he surprised? Asked Voldemort quietly.

Probably because I remembered what disgusting thing he had me doing this time last year. I don’t know why, he’s been having me help him since first year.

Harry stuck his tiny fork into the next snail and twisted it viciously.

Has he formally named you his apprentice?

Harry froze, then kept working. No, Snape hadn’t formally named Harry his apprentice. That was crazy talk. That was right there up on the list with Snape and Harry’s mum in the same sentence for crazy talk.

Harry just thought about Snape and Harry’s mum in the same sentence with Voldemort listening.
Well. That was great.

Harry fell without preamble into the flashback – begging, laughter, flash of green.

Voldemort didn’t comment. Harry kept shucking snails.

#

Harry felt vaguely betrayed when he found out Greg had joined the Slytherin Quidditch team, and then he decided he was being ridiculous.

It was less funny when Crabbe knocked him off his broom midway through the match. Harry couldn’t very well leave, but he watched Greg being carted off to the hospital wing with a horrible feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Crabbe knocking Harry off his own broom at the end of the game was just icing on a rather painful cake. At least, Harry thought smugly, watching Draco glare at him through narrow grey eyes, he’d won the game.

“Too bad your reflexes are slow, huh, Malfoy?” Harry called cheerfully. “Practice, practice, practice.”

Malfoy snarled at him silently. It was a beautiful thing, except then Malfoy had to ruin it by talking about Ron’s family, Ron’s mother, Harry’s mother-

Punching Malfoy felt very, very good. He’d been wanting to do that for weeks, ever since term started.

#

“Yes, Mr. Potter, I think a lifelong ban ought to do the trick,” said Umbridge, her smile widening still further as she watched him struggle to comprehend what she had said. “You and Mr. Weasley here. And I think, to be safe, this young man’s twin ought to be stopped, too--if his teammates had not restrained him, I feel sure he would have attacked young Mr. Malfoy as well. I will want their broomsticks confiscated, of course; I shall keep them safely in my office, to make sure there is no infringement of my ban. But I am not unreasonable, Professor McGonagall,” she continued, turning back to Professor McGonagall who was now standing as still as though carved from ice, staring at her. “The rest of the team can continue playing, I saw no signs of violence from any of them. Well ... good afternoon to you.”

And with a look of the utmost satisfaction, Umbridge left the room, leaving a horrified silence in her wake.

I find, Voldemort commented idly, At times like these that the Cruciatus is the only reasonable reaction.

That actually did sound really reasonable, right now. Professor Umbridge, writhing like one of those spiders Professor-Moody-who-was-actually-Crouch had liked to bring to class to torture. Except, no, Harry was a potions person. He really should go along with his original plan of an untraceable contact poison that caused her to fall slowly ill and perhaps forget who she was. That had worked out pretty well, when it had happened to Professor Lockhart.

Voldemort chuckled. Harry could not bring himself to care.
Voldemort is Competent at Many Things

Harry occluded like mad while Hagrid told his story about the giants, but it probably didn’t matter in the end.

Draco turned up as Harry was trudging home from potions lessons one evening, and Harry, who still had Voldemort paying idle attention in his head and hadn’t felt like putting up the effort to block him out when Harry was busy thinking about monograph formatting, shot Draco a wary look.

“I just don’t think it would be a good idea,” Draco said, as if they were continuing a conversation. “Given your current situation.”

“You mean Voldemort. The thing I told Ginny.”

“Yes. And could you find a better confidant than a teenage girl?”

“Who would you rather I pick, you?”

“It would be convenient,” Draco said lightly. “I never did get anything very useful last year.”

“That’s because I’m having no luck the past few years figuring out his master plan,” Harry said tiredly. “Sorry.”

*I’ll tell you, if you like.*

Harry froze. Draco eyed him, then bowed shallowly.

*Such a polite boy,* Voldemort commented.

You leave him alone, Harry thought sturdily.

Aren’t you curious?

Not if you want me to know. (Well, yes, I am, but it’s probably a trap somehow. I’m not a complete idiot.)

Harry closed his eyes, and built a wall in his mind out of brooms and Quidditch hoops. He opened his eyes.

“Right. So, my year is terrible. Yours?”

“Moderately wonderful. I’m king of the castle, you realize.”

“S’ppose I do.”

“Is he-?”

“Not right now. I can occlude.”

“I bet you’re terrible at it.”

Harry shrugged, and started walking back up towards Gryffindor tower again.

“Why was Longbottom so fussy with me, the other day?”
“You don’t know?”

“If I knew I probably would have been an ass about it before now.”

“I promised not to go sharing it around.”

“Shall I ask my father?”

“…your mother would know, I suppose.”

“My mother,” Draco said blandly.

“Right.”

“This sounds like a story I would be curious to learn.”

“Mm.”

“What’s he like?”

“Who.”

“The Dark Lord, Potter. Obviously.”

“Evil. Bored. I’m not interested in chatting with him, Draco.”

“Why is it happening, do you know?”

“Something to do with him almost killing me. I don’t know. I’m not sure even Dumbledore does.”

“The problem with dueling practice,” Draco said, because Draco was very self-involved, “Is that we’ll be caught, and I don’t want to attract the High Inquisitor’s attention.”

“Coward.”

“Now, now, Harry. Is that any way to talk to someone who gives you hair care tips out of the goodness of his heart?”

“I’ve got an invisibility cloak and you’re an animagus. We can get away with it if we want.”

Draco seemed to consider this.

“What’s the place?”

“Magic disappearing room. But I’m not telling you where it is without a promise not to tell anyone else or any teachers.”

“Don’t trust me?”

“Not an idiot. And what was with Crabbe cracking Greg in the back with a bludger like that? Accident my foot.”

“Vince is just angry Greg ran off on us,” Draco said distantly.

Harry glanced at him, and didn’t comment.

“Well. Good night.”
“If I decide to do this, I’ll turn cat and come visiting.”

“Sure.”

#

Have you poisoned Dolores Umbridge yet? Voldemort asked in the middle of History of Magic class.

This was getting pretty old.

No, Harry thought, Because I’d get kicked out of school and then you’d kill me.

Only if you got caught.

I’m not my dad. I don’t think nearly getting caught and killed is fun.

So you’re going to let her get away with it?

Looks like.

She’s just going to keep escalating the situation. She needs to feel in control, and no one can control Hogwarts.

You’re talking about someone else needing to feel in control?

I appreciate organized chaos.

Voldemort was very, very disturbing.

Tell Binns you need to use the restroom, and go see Severus.

Why.

Because I know a little something about causing trouble at Hogwarts.

This cannot possibly be a good idea.

But don’t you want to see Dolores Umbridge with a glossy mane of blonde curls, courtesy of a benign hair care potion?

Harry visualized this.

There had to be a reason this was a bad idea. Voldemort wouldn’t suggest good ideas. This was a terrible idea, somehow.

Harry couldn’t see how, though, and Professor Snape had been adamant about not giving him the hair care potion to cause trouble with….

Harry hated Umbridge a lot less than he hated Voldemort, but he couldn’t do anything about Voldemort. He could, possibly, do something about Umbridge.

“Professor Binns, can I go to the restroom?”

#

Professor Snape was in his office, and got this neat little line between his eyebrows when Harry said,
“He says you should give me the hair potion.”

“...though I am fain to discuss this with you, Potter, I must remind you that there is no evidence of that whatsoever.”

Tell him, in these words... there’s no reason to let one of Fudge’s people torture the child without consequence.

Harry made a face, but he really did want to see Umbridge’s face.

“He says there’s no reason to let one of Fudge’s people torture the child without consequence.”

“Mister Potter. Torture?”

Tell him she uses a blood quill.

Harry shrugged.

“There’s a blood quill at her detentions?”

Professor Snape froze solid. Harry watched with interest.

Professor Snape went to a cabinet, got out a green bottle, and handed it over to Harry with a scowl.

“If you are caught, I shall be most displeased.”

“I won’t be,” Harry said.

#

It turned out Voldemort knew a lot about how to talk Peeves around to helping you prank a Hogwarts teacher with an aggressive hair care potion.

It turned out Peeves thought it would be funny to set it on the entire staff table at dinner. Professor Snape heroically rescued the rest of the staff table, after Umbridge and Hagrid had been viciously beautified, with a barked *finite incantatem.* Thus perished the slimy green hair care potion, in a good cause.

Dolores Umbridge’s mood did not improve just because her blond hair was glossy and curled like Shirley Temple locks. Something about being pranked with a facehugger.
“Hermione.”

Hermione jumped, whirling to face him. Draco never stopped getting a kick out of the way people jumped when he turned up after sneaking up on them cat-quiet. More than a year as an animagus and he was only falling more and more in love with it. (If only McGonagall hadn’t felt the need to give him extra lessons.)

“Draco,” she said. “Are you here as a friend or enemy?”

“That depends. How’s your occlumency?”

“I don’t have very many people trying to break into my mind, but I have been practicing for years and years… why?”

“I need the best in your little set at occlumency. It’s not Potter.”

“That would probably be me, then. Ron doesn’t practice.”

“Has he told you, yet? Harry, not Ron.”

“Told me what?”

“About Voldemort.”

Hermione eyed him.

“About Voldemort invading his mind,” Draco elaborated.

Hermione stared some more.

“He hasn’t,” Draco said flatly. “He told the tiny Weaselette. Something about how to cope with the problem. He should be coping by practicing occlumency until his eyes bleed.”

Hermione, at this point, had her hand over her mouth and Draco was building up a good head of steam. (While keeping an eye out for anyone nearby. He’d gotten good at that, too.)

“He needs a proper dueling partner,” Draco finished. “I suggest Greg. I’m going to be using Vince. And you need to keep an eye on him, for if it turns from mental contamination to control.”

Hermione nodded sharply, blinking back tears. Weak. Draco smiled.

“You’re really perfect. No one will think you’ll amount to anything, because of your blood, so you’ll be constantly underestimated. And I can say I’m just talking to you because you’re pretty.”

“And I… am very angry with you, because you’re harassing me for being a girl and muggleborn?”

“Perfect. Good night, Miss Granger.”

Draco let himself slide into cat shape and trotted away, tail high in the air. He was glad he’d gotten that decision out of the way, even though it was a little sad he wouldn’t be dueling Harry again for a while. It simply wasn’t worth the risk.
Serpent's Fangs and Harsh Reality

Voldemort happened to check in during an evening when Harry was teaching the DA. Harry caught it almost immediately, but was busy dodging a hex and that took some concentration. In fact, he found to his frustration, teaching and practicing were both terrible for his occlumency. It felt – spotty – like he was tuning a radio and it kept going through static and through music.

*I’m glad to see you are not being complacent*, Voldemort commented, and then it stopped being so hard to keep his mind in one place and clear. Voldemort wasn’t there anymore, an indescribable, formless feeling behind his eyes.

Harry thought about it, as he went around and checked everyone’s work on their spells. It was probably about respect again – Voldemort seemed to care about that – Harry lying down and dying wouldn’t be as fun for him as Harry practicing a lot, fighting fairly, and then dying.

“Are you feeling okay, Harry?” Hermione asked.

“Sure. Same as usual.”

Harry tried a smile out on her, but her return smile was rather tired.

“House elf unionization keeping you up?”

“And other things,” she allowed. “I want to be ready for whatever happens next.”

Harry nodded.

“Whenever I start worrying,” he told her, watching the crowded class cast colorful spells at each other, “I just remember that Green Potion braided Hagrid’s beard before he went where good potions go. That’s a good memory.”

“You really shouldn’t have done that to the teachers,” Hermione said, apparently trying to be pious. Harry didn’t buy it for a minute.

“No real harm done, though, and they didn’t think it was me.”

At which point someone hailed Harry, and he had to go be teacher again.

#

Snuffles,

*What do you think our chances are at Christmas break?*

-Harry

#

Harry,

*Not looking good. Not your fault. Things here fine.*

Snuffles
Snuffles,

_Hedwig hurt her wing on the way back. Let her stay there until she feels better?_  
_One important thing: destroy it as soon as possible. Can’t write why._

Merry Christmas,

Harry

At the last DA meeting, Cho kissed him under the mistletoe.

Harry wandered back to his dorm very slowly, in a daze.

_Teenagers. You do realize this is rather distracting?_  
_So’s you trying to take over the world. At least mine’s fun._

_I will settle for the United Kingdom. I am not unreasonable._  
_I’ve never kissed anyone before._

His head was silent for a little while. That was nice.

_You should inform Severus._

_Why?_

Voldemort’s attention turned elsewhere, and Harry went back to worrying about Cho. She’d been crying. That had been odd.

Ron was quite interested, but only if his sister were not to be upset, but also he’d heard she was dating Michael Corner now and that really wasn’t okay. Harry should consider his options, that was all Ron was saying.

Harry fell asleep, and dreamed of a snake attacking Arthur Weasley. Usually he could control these dreams. Tonight, he couldn’t. He was pulled along, all in a rush, and all he could do was be as still and quiet as he can, for fear someone would notice he was a snake attacking Mr. Weasley and uninvited him from the Burrow (as is the logic in dreams).

He woke, all in a panic, and told Ron, stumbling over the words, everything rushing together, head aching fit to split open. Then he told Professor McGonagall.

Then she told him he was going to go see the headmaster, and the bottom fell out of the world. Oh, he didn’t want to go see the headmaster.

_“You misunderstand me,” said Dumbledore, still in the same calm tone. “I mean ... can you remember--er--where you were positioned as you watched this attack happen? Were you perhaps_
standing beside the victim, or else looking down on the scene from above?"

This was such a curious question that Harry gaped at Dumbledore; it was almost as though he knew ... 

"I was the snake," he said. "I saw it all from the snake's point of view."

All this worry about hiding it from him, and he knew. It was completely typical, completely unfair, and Harry still didn’t know if anyone at all was looking for Mr. Weasley.

But events were moving, and Dumbledore seemed to be taking care of things. Harry studied his shoes, and finally remembered to occlude. It had been just luck Voldemort hadn’t looked in right now. His barriers were wavering walls, but they were something.

It was all topsy-turvy in his head. He remembered, suddenly, as if he’d been living in a fog, that Voldemort was not just a voice in his head that said scholarly things about runic magic. That Voldemort had killed his parents, and had just done his best to kill another of Harry’s precious adults – whether Voldemort was an animagus or there were some spell involved, Harry would bet his last galleon this was because of their connection. Their connection, which Harry hadn’t stamped out. Their connection, which had just warned Harry in time to save Arthur Weasley’s life.

Harry was getting a headache above and beyond his usual curse scar headache.

This, Harry decided firmly, was a time for drugs.

“Candy, anyone? I’ve got lemon flavor, chocolates, and caramels.”

He popped a chocolate into his own mouth.

“I will take a lemon flavored candy, my boy,” said Dumbledore. Harry handed the bag of lemon candy to Ron to pass to the headmaster. “Do they have a name?”

“Sunny Lemons,” Harry said. “They’re cheerful.”

Fred and George both accepted caramels with knowing looks – they’d been the ones to make this batch, after all. Ginny took a lemon candy, and Ron a chocolate.

It was an innocent mistake – as they were using the portkey, Harry happened to glance up and for a moment, he met Professor Dumbledore’s blue eyes. Pain blazed inside his skull, and Harry was in Grimmauld Place and looking at Sirius and everyone was talking to him.

You are inconvenient, Harry Potter, hissed Voldemort in his mind.

Harry closed his eyes very tightly. Everyone was still talking. His head was still trying to split open. He was still very calm. He held up a hand for calm, without opening his eyes.

“I have magic visions of Voldemort sometimes. It’s pretty painful. My head’s going to fall off and crawl into a gutter. I missed the other questions.”

“What happened to our dad?” asked Fred.

“Giant snake. Don’t know why or where or how Voldemort got a giant snake. Don’t know why I have visions of him. Dumbledore knows, so… no panicking. It’s just one more thing.”

“Harry,” said Sirius. “Do you need to sit down?”
“I need to lie down, I think. Someplace quiet. I’m sorry.”

“C’mon,” Sirius said, and picked him up. Harry yelped, tensed, but Sirius completely ignored this as he carried him up the stairs.

“First rule of having a seer around,” Sirius informed him lightly. “Make sure the seer takes care of himself.”

“Not a seer.”

“Just an idiot. You should have told me it was happening again.”

“By owl?” Harry said sarcastically.

“Point. But hey, at least you got to come home for Christmas.”

“Mm. Home.”

There was something about that that Harry was not quite following, that he should worry about, but his head was really hurting – Voldemort was furious, somewhere, and everything was bleeding together.

Harry was tucked in under his bedspread Mrs. Weasley gave him. That was enough, for now.

*Harry*, whispered Voldemort gently. *We need to talk about this.*

*We really don’t. You might’ve killed Mr. Weasley.*

*You went poking your nose someplace you were not permitted.*

*If you think I’m doing ANY of this on PURPOSE- I hate you. Leave me alone.*

*Poor little chosen one. So angry because Dumbledore doesn’t tell you anything.*

*I’m pretty sure you’re the one who’s mad at him, not me.*

*Oh, you’re furious, Harry. Not quite so furious as I am, but so few people are.*

Harry tried to gather the necessary emotional detachment to clear his mind and occlude and it completely failed to come. Mr. Weasley was in the hospital. There wasn’t any emotional detachment to be had, not for love nor money.

He had felt it, he had been the snake, he had felt his teeth sinking in. He felt tremendously guilty and tremendously confused. Voldemort felt tremendously angry and preoccupied, and then his presence was gone. Harry sagged, relieved. He could lie quietly in the dark for a while.

After an indeterminate amount of time, Sirius popped his head in.

“You want to do something about breakfast, Harry? I can’t figure out how to work the stove.”

Which was a stone cold lie, but Harry appreciated it. He pulled himself out of bed and downstairs, and the day began.

“I shouldn’t have gone to bed,” Harry said in an undertone to Sirius.

“Sure you should have,” Sirius replied. “It’s your bed, isn’t it?”
Harry grinned crookedly at him, and let that be answer enough for now.

“Got you a few things,” Sirius said. “Christmas presents, but I didn’t wrap them because I didn’t think you’d be here. They’re in your room.”

It wasn’t really the time, but later, later Harry would be happy about that. Mr. Weasley would be okay, and Harry would be happy about that.

They had to talk to Mrs. Weasley for a few minutes, but then Harry was tugging Sirius away into the pantry for privacy.

“Harry?” asked Sirius.

“It’s worse than I’ve been telling anyone. I think Dumbledore knows, but I just – it’s worse. The connection, it’s not just visions I’m getting from him, he gets stuff from me, I think, so you can’t let anyone tell me anything important, I’m working on my occlumency but I’m pants at it, I’m trying-“

“Breathe,” Sirius said firmly.

“And Professor Snape can’t do anything about it for stupid spy reasons or something, I don’t know.”

“…Snape knew about this?”

Harry tucked his hands into his pockets.

“I’m sorry. I know I’m not making much sense.”

“No,” said Sirius slowly, face shadowed. “Don’t be sorry. Like Molly’s been saying, we’re the grown ups. We’re the ones who are supposed to take care of this.”

“And the locket – it’s a Slytherin family heirloom, your brother stole it or something. He died over it, Sirius, I couldn’t put that in a letter.”

All the breath and life seemed to drain right out of Sirius. Harry felt very alone.

“It’s going to be a good day,” Sirius said in a soft, thoughtful voice, “When we figure out what destroys that thing. Isn’t it?”

“Yeah, Sirius,” said Harry, trying for bracing. “A really good day.”

Harry retreated to his room and barely felt the conversation and hubbub around him. He concentrated on his occlumency barriers. That was his job right now. He’d let Voldemort in too far, been too complacent. Voldemort wasn’t a murderer in an abstract sense, like Sirius or Snape. He hadn’t tried to kill someone ages and ages ago, like Sirius, or maybe killed people but Harry wasn’t even sure who or how many, like Professor Snape. Voldemort was killing people now. It didn’t matter if he was civil. Harry had to get his head on straight, and that meant not having Voldemort whispering in his ear.

“Harry,” whispered Ginny during a quiet moment. “Is this because-“

Harry nodded jerkily.

“I’m going to be more careful, Gin,” he said. “Talk to Sirius and Dumbledore. Whoever I have to.”

“…it’s not a bad thing if it helped rescue dad,” she said. “But the worst thing about him is he’s not all bad.”
Ginny got a very firm hug. If Harry believed in soulmates, maybe he’d believe in someone with the same sorts of scars on their soul….

But that was a thought for another time.
Sirius Attempts Parenting

“’Course he's worried,” growled Moody. “The boy's seeing things from inside You-Know-Who’s snake. Obviously, Potter doesn't realize what that means, but if You-Know-Who's possessing him—“

Harry pulled the Extendable Ear out of his own, his heart hammering very fast and heat rushing up his face. He looked around at the others. They were all staring at him, the strings still trailing from their ears, looking suddenly fearful.

It was Ginny who spoke up.

“So, it looks like our big secret’s out,” she said, looking around at her brothers. “I’ve been helping Harry with it. I’ve got experience, don’t I? So you can all stop making jokes about me and Michael Corner.”

Her brothers did not seem reassured.

“We’ll talk back out the house,” Harry said, digging out his authority voice from the DA. “I can explain.”

“Not sure there’s any way you can explain that, partner,” said Fred.

“It’s not Harry’s fault, is it,” Ginny said tartly. “He didn’t invite—“

Ginny hesitated, as a nurse wandered by.

“Back at the house,” Harry said firmly.

#

The twins and Ginny and Ron piled into Harry’s room, settling awkwardly on his lack of furniture – Harry sat on his bed, and after a moment Fred and George came back with chairs.

“I’ve been working on blocking him since the beginning of fall term,” Harry started. “With occlumency, remember, Ron? I haven’t been arguing with the grownups when they want to keep me away from things – you heard them, they all know about it. The only thing they don’t know is that I know.”

“Mate, why didn’t you tell me?” Ron asked. “I thought we got over this last year. I can’t help if you keep secrets.”

Harry wasn’t quite sure.

“Because it feels like it’s your secret. Your own special thing, and you don’t want anyone to intrude on it,” said Ginny. “That’s how it felt.”

Harry frowned.

“Maybe a little. But mostly – all of them were being so clever, not telling me about my life. I wanted to know something about my life that they didn’t, for a change.”

“That’s nuts, Harry,” said George kindly. “We keep some sorts of secrets from mum, but not Voldemort level secrets. You can’t just trust the DA with this.”
Fred being the voice of reason was really not something Harry had been counting on. Harry eyed him.

“How ‘bout I go get my mum, and then you can finish explaining?” George said.

“No. No, absolutely not. She’s upset enough as it is.”

Harry did not like the look the twins were giving him. The twins were not good at listening.

“Sirius,” Harry decided. “He’s sort of – I almost called him my mum, never tell him I did that.”

That got a laugh from the room, ruining the solemn air. Fred and George went to track down Sirius, and Harry trailed Ron into Ron’s room, where a portrait told Harry from Dumbledore to stay where he was.

Harry ducked into the loo, and indulged in hating the headmaster a bit.

I hate him. Sometimes I really just hate him.

Music to my ears, Harry. Why are we hating the headmaster today?

Harry closed his eyes and tried to think about nothing.

Ah. High handed orders.

Stop looking at my memories.

If a guest comes around and you’ve left things out all over the table, it isn’t their fault if they glance at them.

You’re not a GUEST.

I’m not the one keeping you tucked away in a little box until you’re needed, little weapon.

Wait. Did that make Harry the secret weapon Voldemort was looking for?

Voldemort chuckled.

I knew they were keeping you ignorant. I didn’t realize they were lying to you. Delightful.

Harry resisted the urge to ask what he meant, and grabbed a chocolate from his bag. He’d be calm if it killed him.

Occlumency barriers back in place, Harry ducked back out of the loo and back to his bedroom. The sea of expectant faces – Sirius, Fred, George, Ron, Ginny – made him want to go hide in another loo. He didn’t.

He sat down on his bed.

“It started at the beginning of term,” he said, “And I suppose I know how people feel when they star in a telly show, now….”

Explaining took quiet, exhausting hours. Sirius wanted to come stay in Hogsmeade to keep an eye on him. Harry pointed out that it would be a great idea as long as Sirius never told Harry where he was or how to meet him.
“So,” Sirius asked, after everyone had exhausted their questions about occlusion, Voldemort, and why Harry hadn’t trusted them, “Where does Snape fit into all of this?”

“He knows.”

“He knows more than he’s told the headmaster,” Sirius said darkly. “The headmaster told me—well. He didn’t suspect this.”

“Are you going to tell him?” Harry asked.

“I should. You’re sure you’re occluding now?”

“Absolutely sure. Sirius, I don’t want you to tell him.”

“Tough,” Sirius said, but with a small smile. “But you’ve got a bit of time— I’m not using anyone or anything to pass this message, and I’m not running off to Hogwarts myself. I’ll keep it under my fur, as long as you keep him out of your head. Promise me.”

Harry looked mulish.

“It helped, last night.”

“Did you have the dream on purpose?”

“No.”

“Then you’re allowed to have dreams you can’t control. During the day, during your life, keep him out of your head.”

“What if I don’t?”

Sirius stood, pacing.

“Never done this before, have I? Treating you like a kid. Used to hate it when my parents…but then, James…hm.”

Harry eyed this with some worry.

“If you don’t promise to keep him out of your head,” Sirius said firmly, “You don’t get your Christmas presents.”

Harry blinked.

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

Harry attempted to wrap his head around a lack of Christmas presents as a punishment.

(The Weasleys, still there, watched in silence.)

“…if I do promise, do I get a present early?” Harry asked cautiously. He felt like he was channeling Dudley, but he wasn’t sure who else to copy.

Sirius grinned, in an abrupt reversal of mood, and swung open Harry’s wardrobe and tossed him a bright green—something. Harry wasn’t quite sure what it was, because the fabric covered him
entirely, as if he was under a blanket.

Harry dug himself out of his new ocean of fabric and found himself holding a padded green something, spangled in silver stars. He stood, shaking it out.

It was a green quilted silk dressing gown, covered in about twenty silver stars that doubled as pockets.

“I found it in one of the old guest rooms,” Sirius said, watching him from beneath dark hair. “Cleaned it up a bit. I thought not everything you needed to own was red, and you are getting pretty addicted to pockets. This – this definitely has enough pockets.”

Harry tried it on over his clothes.

Ron tried, bravely, “You look – very stylish – real Dumbledore fashion sense-“

General hilarity ensued. Harry grinned to himself, and stuck his hands in two of his pockets.

“If I keep collecting red and green,” Harry commented, “I’ll end up looking like a Christmas elf and Hermione will try to set me free.”

“Worse things could happen,” Ron commented. “I’m starved. Let’s go eat.”

#

Harry was drifting between sleep and wakefulness after a very long day, when Voldemort said, *Have you ever heard of the laws of war, Harry?*

*No. I’m not talking to you.*

The laws of war govern who is an acceptable target. To explain it simply, it separates the world into military targets and civilian targets. Those who take up arms to fight are acceptable targets, while women and children at home are not. Arthur Weasley, for example, was a combatant.

Harry was very tired. He tried to pummel his brain into logic. It didn’t quite work.

*That’s stupid,* he replied. *You’re just being a bastard. I know you kill women and kids.*

*Not without reason, Harry.*

*Like ‘that muggle looked at me funny?’ That sort of reason?*

*It depends. You, for instance- well, if your guardians haven’t told you, I’m sure they have a good reason.*

*My mum and dad were fighting you. They were in the Order. I know that.*

*What does Severus say about this lack of curiosity of yours, I wonder.*

*I’ve never been accused of a lack of curiosity in my life. And I’m not talking to you.*

*Ah, well. Worth a try.*

Harry considered Voldemort going about his day, plotting out lines of argument to try on him, Harry Potter, and decided this was really stupid.
Why are you even trying? You're not Draco, you're not naïve, you know I'm not going to magically come 'round to your side or anything.

Talking to you makes me feel more human, Harry. As I told everyone last summer, I spent the past fourteen years clinging to life. Watching you reminds me of the little things.

I am not a TELLY SHOW. I'm a person. People are people. It matters if they're happy or sad or live or die. You complete nutter.

You are very lucky, child, that we do not have an audience for these little conversations. Generally, I have to insist on a level of decorum.

Like bowing to death and melodramatic rot like that.

I find my followers respond well to 'melodramatic rot,' thank you.

I'm going to recite Quidditch statistics until you go away now.

Amusing though you trying to bore me to death is, I've decided to show you something.

Harry fell asleep, and dreamed of a corridor where something wonderful was hiding.
The next day was (mostly) very happy. Sirius was singing as he went around the house decorating for Christmas, which Harry found faintly unnatural but also absolutely wonderful. Harry wore his new dressing gown around everywhere—it was a drafty old barn of a house, it was cold—and pointed out that he could only be accused of lacking House spirit if he wore green at Hogwarts. Mrs. Weasley supported this by pointing out that it matched his eyes, and that was the end of that—except for Fred and George, who seemed intent on ‘accidentally’ mistaking him for Professor Dumbledore every time he turned around.

Hermione turning up was wonderful, and Harry repeated the experience of explaining the situation—she seemed very calm about it, and had actually reread every book in the library on occlumency and possession recently—“I thought we might be able to use something about them in the DA”—so she had some very intelligent questions to ask.

Christmas Day dawned with Harry struggling to feel guilty about being happy about having everyone he cared about in one place under his roof. He tried to convince himself it was not his fault Mr. Weasley had been attacked by a giant snake, but this was not very convincing. He felt like he had turned into a giant snake and attacked Mr. Weasley to gather everyone at his house, and no amount of logic could convince him otherwise.

The rest of Harry’s Christmas present from Sirius was a pair of fluffy slippers that looked like they’d been skinned off some sort of great beast. (“Don’t ask, Harry. But they’ll be dreadfully warm.”) And a shared gift from him and Remus of books entitled *Practical Defensive Magic and its Use Against the Dark Arts*.

Harry stuck his odd fanged wallet from Hagrid on a bookshelf and his weird painting from Dobby on the wall, and felt like his room was really developing character.

Visiting the hospital managed to quiet Harry’s good spirits—especially meeting Neville’s parents. Harry, Kreacher, and Sirius had some nasty arguments as the holidays wound down. Harry, who hated practicing occlumency all the time, was testy, and only the DA prevented him from wanting to drop Hogwarts altogether and work on destroying the locket with Sirius. Kreacher, meanwhile, was of the sneaking suspicion they were not taking its destruction seriously, and had some unkind and probably true things to say about Mundungus Fletcher, thieves, and the family silver. Sirius never quite came out and said he thought Harry dropping out of school to stay home with him was a brilliant plan, but he had dark moods that sent Harry off to his friends for some company that wasn’t quite so…damaged.

Harry pushed open the kitchen door to find Sirius and Snape both seated at the long kitchen table, glaring in opposite directions. The silence between them was heavy with mutual dislike. A letter lay open on the table in front of Sirius.

“Er,” said Harry, to announce his presence.

Snape looked around at him, his face framed between curtains of greasy black hair.

“Sit down, Potter.”

“You know,” said Sirius loudly, leaning back on his rear chair legs and speaking to the ceiling, “I
think I'd prefer it if you didn't give orders here, Snape. It's my house, you see.”

An ugly flush suffused Snape's pallid face. Harry sat down in a chair beside Sirius, facing Snape across the table.

“I was supposed to see you alone, Potter,” said Snape, the familiar sneer curling his mouth, “but Black—“

“I'm his godfather,” said Sirius, louder than ever.

“I am here on Dumbledore's orders,” said Snape, whose voice, by contrast, was becoming more and more quietly waspish, “but by all means stay, Black, I know you like to feel ... involved.”

“What's that supposed to mean?” said Sirius, letting his chair fall back on to all four legs with a loud bang.

“Merely that I am sure you must feel--ah--frustrated by the fact that you can do nothing useful,” Snape laid a delicate stress on the word, “for the Order.”

It was Sirius's turn to flush. Snape's lip curled in triumph as he turned to Harry.

“The Headmaster has sent me to tell you, Potter, that it is his wish for you to study Occlumency this term.”

“The headmaster has sent you to tell me that he wants me to study Occlumency,” Harry repeated blankly.

“Professor Dumbledore thinks you may have a mental connection to Lord Voldemort,” Professor Snape said very neutrally.

“He thinks I may have a mental connection to Lord Voldemort,” Harry repeated.

“He has his reasons to be suspicious.”

“His reasons to be suspicious.”

“This is going to be difficult enough without you repeating everything I say,” Professor Snape snapped.

“I feel like someone could start a joke this way. Three people walk into my mind, someone gets hit in the head by a bar….”

“Spare me your juvenile sense of humor, Potter.”

“I think you can spare Harry your idea of how it’s appropriate to talk to kids, Snape,” said Sirius. Harry jumped. He’d rather forgotten Sirius was in the room.

“That is precisely none of your business. I am his teacher—“

“Just because you teach at his school doesn’t give you license to act like yourself all the time.”

“I am his teacher. I will talk to him as I see fit, Black. Potter, your Occlumency lessons will be Mondays at 6. If anyone asks, they are simply an extension of your Potions….” Professor Snape shot Sirius a poisonous look, “Apprenticeship.”

Sirius was standing up.
“If you think my godson is going anywhere near being your apprentice, you sniveling sack of slime, you have another thing coming!”

“I accept,” Harry said quietly.

Both of them stared at him.

“What?” asked Sirius.

“I had Hermione look up how apprenticeship works a couple months ago. I accept.”

Professor Snape blinked at him. Sirius sat back down heavily.

“Harry….” Sirius said slowly, “You can’t know what you’re saying. He’s a Death Eater. Reformed or not, he’s black as they come. And I have my questions about reformed.”

“Professor Snape,” Harry said severely, “Has saved my life tons of times. That’s good enough for me. I think it should be good enough for you. I need a master, if I want to get my own potions mastery. I’ve been wanting it to be him for years. So… I think you should apologize for trying to murder him, that one time. Under the circumstances.”

Both Sirius and Professor Snape seemed to have forgotten how to move, or breathe. Professor Snape recovered first.

“Yes,” he whispered malevolently. “Perhaps you should apologize for ‘trying to murder me that one time.’ I would certainly appreciate it.”

Sirius gave him a look of intense dislike.

“I wasn’t trying to murder him,” he said. “I was just trying to give him a lesson in being a nosy little snake. I knew he’d slither out of it somehow.”

Harry gave Sirius an incredibly unimpressed look, and folded his arms.

“Sorry,” Sirius said, in as unconvincing a tone as Harry had ever heard.

“Your apology is accepted in the spirit it was given,” Snape said with a bitter smile, eyes hooded.

“Great!” Harry said, standing up. “I feel like this calls for cake to celebrate my new apprenticeship. What flavor will everyone have?”

“My errand is done, Potter,” Snape said, standing as well. “I shall leave you to your… family… to celebrate.”

Snape swept from the room. Sirius watched him go, and shook his head.

“Chocolate raspberry cake will work for me, Harry.”

At which point the entire Weasley clan poured into the room, and Harry endured a lively discussion of whether this was a further sign of insanity. He made a chocolate raspberry cake and a carrot cake, and Fred and George magicked up a banner reading “Congratulations on Your Apprenticeship With Evil Nose, Hope You Don’t Die”
“Crucio.”

Draco glared at the mouse, his wand still leveled at it. The mouse’s whiskers twitched at him.

“Avada kedavra.”

The mouse investigated the piece of cheese next it, and started nibbling. Draco hissed at it.

He had his spare wand. He was in the part of the grounds fully shielded from nosy spells like the Trace. He knew the spells. He’d seen them done before. He’d killed tons of mice before. What was the problem.

“Imperio,” he commanded, and that flowed through him easily, like dark honey. The mouse looked up from its cheese and trotted easily over to its water dish, where it proceeded to drown itself merrily.

Draco ran his hands through his hair, grabbed a handful each, and tugged gently.

It didn’t really help.

“Young Draco. Does your father know you are so precocious?” asked a soft, hissing voice.

Draco jumped, turned, met the Dark Lord’s eyes, and dropped to his knees, eyes firmly on the ground.

“Rise.”

Draco got back to his feet, slowly, tucking his wand away.

“May I see that?”

Draco handed the wand over, keeping his gaze averted.

“Tell me about your wand.”

“That’s not- that is, my wand is hawthorn and unicorn hair. That’s a spare I picked up. Maple and unicorn, I think.”

The Dark Lord returned it, and Draco put it hastily away.

“Are you frightened of me, young Malfoy?”

Draco jerked his chin up and met the Dark Lord’s eerie eyes.

Some days I think I’m a bit of a coward, Draco thought to himself, and said aloud, “No, sir.”

The Dark Lord smiled thinly.

“You may call me ‘my lord.’ You will be joining my Death Eaters soon, I hope? Your father seems to think you need more time to learn, but you seem quite – eager.”

“Thank you, my lord,” Draco said, tasting the words on his tongue. “I still have a great deal to learn.”

He still wasn’t sure what he was doing wrong.
“You’re not having any fun, Draco,” the Dark Lord said. “Do you have more of those mice?”

“Yes,” he hesitated, “My lord.”

It felt strange. It felt like he was a grownup.

He got another mouse from his box of mice. Catching them had been fun.

“The Crucius depends on delight,” the Dark Lord said. “You must understand the pain you wish to cause and truly wish it. Let the impulse to cause it fill you, and flow from your wand. Your wand is your will, and your will is power. Crucio.”

The mouse writhed, tiny voice shrill with pain. Draco watched, and wasn’t sure how to feel.

After all, in the end it was just a mouse. Mouse were funny when you hurt them, when they tried to run away and you swatted them back into the circle of your paws….

He pointed his wand, and thought about the mouse entertaining him.

“Crucio.”

The mouse screamed. Draco smiled.

“Very good. Your father will be proud, I’m sure. That is a complex spell, for one so young.”

Draco’s smile broadened, though he wasn’t sure his father would appreciate him practicing his curses without permission….

“You have my permission, Draco. You need no other.”

Draco swallowed. He had heard the Dark Lord was a legimens, but to experience it himself-

“Thank you, my lord.”

“Try it again.”

And Draco did – he couldn’t quite get the right feeling, the first few times, nervous under the watchful eyes of the Dark Lord, but crucio flowed back into him, heady as firewhiskey, and it became easier and easier with each successful casting.

“Very nice,” the Dark Lord said. “Now, kill it, if you please. Like snuffing out a candle.”

“Avada kedavra,” Draco murmured, and there was the briefest flash of green. The mouse stilled, finally.

“Come along. That’s enough games for one day. I’m sure your father is curious what you’ve been up to.”

Draco followed behind the Dark Lord, mind preoccupied by the heady pleasure of the magical power. Riding the crest of the wave.

“Tell me your impressions of Harry Potter.”

“His best subjects are Defense Against the Dark Arts and Potions. His best friends are Hermione Granger, a mudblood, and Ronald Weasley, Arthur Weasley’s youngest son….”
Sirius took Harry aside and gave him a way to get ahold of him if Harry was in trouble as Harry was about to leave for the Knight Bus. Harry screwed up his courage and hugged the man. Neither of them seemed quite sure what to do with themselves after that, but luckily the flow of leave-taking washed them away, social niceties observed.

After the Knight Bus dropped them all at Hogsmeade, Harry was saying goodbye to everyone when Remus said something that startled him.

“Look after yourselves,” said Lupin, shaking hands all round and reaching Harry last. “And listen...” he lowered his voice while the rest of them exchanged last-minute goodbyes with Tonks, “Harry, I know you don't like Snape, but he is a superb Occlumens and we all--Sirius included--want you to learn to protect yourself, so work hard, all right?”

“Yeah, all right,” said Harry heavily, looking up into Lupin's prematurely lined face. “See you, then.”

Harry spent the walk to the castle trying to figure out why someone would think he didn’t like Professor Snape. Just because he and Ron constantly complained the man was evil, got detention with frightening regularity, and Professor Snape treated Harry like mud whenever they were in public.…

Oh.

Right.

Harry forgot that other people didn’t selectively filter everything Professor Snape through a series of fine-grained filters developed over the course of five years of habit. Funny, that. He wondered what he would have thought of Professor Snape if he hadn’t put the effort in.

#

Professor Snape explaining legimency and occlumency was very different from the book explaining it.

“So, Voldemort can read minds with everyone?”

“If we are going to continue this, you will not use the Dark Lord’s name.”

“Why not? I always do.”

“Because, Potter, saying something or someone’s name is a way to summon them. Do you wish to draw that particular strain of attention right now?”

“I’m occluding, alright? My mind is clear, my emotions are clear, I got new Quidditch statistics from the Daily Prophet to recite.”

“Quidditch statistics.”

“Very boring. You don’t think I could lose his interest by memorizing Potions facts, do you?”

“Hm. How much of this was review?”
“I mostly focused on defensive theory before. I never thought about what it would look like from the attacker’s point of view.”

“It is not necessarily an attack.”

Harry eyed his professor.

“You will see.”

“Stand up and take out your wand, Potter.”

Harry got to his feet, feeling nervous. They faced each other with the desk between them.

“You may use your wand to attempt to disarm me, or defend yourself in any other way you can think of,” said Snape.

“And what are you going to do?” Harry asked, eyeing Snape’s wand apprehensively.

“I am about to attempt to break into your mind,” said Snape softly. “We are going to see how well you resist. I have been told that you have already shown aptitude at resisting the Imperius Curse. You will find that similar powers are needed for this ... brace yourself, now. Legimimens!”

Resisting active legimency was very different from building mental walls with Voldemort on the other side. After Professor Snape had flipped through his memories like a scrapbook, and Harry had accidentally cast a stinging hex, Professor Snape drew back, tilting his head.

“You never told me you were almost sorted into Slytherin.”

“That’s because that was private.”

“Then perhaps you should learn occlumency.”

“I thought I knew occlumency.”

“Do not take your frustrations out on me, Potter. If you do not wish me to see, stop me.”

“You-“

“Yes?”

“Just like potions, right? Discipline and focus?”


That got almost a laugh from Harry, before he firmed his stance and let the feel of the wind carry him. Let’s see how Professor Snape liked the feel of flying the way Harry flew in Quidditch.

It turned out that Professor Snape did not like it. It turned out that Professor Snape could add feelings and memories, not just look through embarrassing ones. Harry wasn’t sure how Professor Snape had gotten a memory of dipping his hands in acid, but Harry wasn’t a fan.

And then they were falling down an endless corridor, towards a black door. And Harry recognized it.

No need to worry about that right now, Harry. Hello, Severus. I rather thought you’d be visiting soon. I think we should all take a moment to share a memory, said Voldemort, softly amused.
And then they both fell into a memory, as if putting a foot through a missing stair.

"Lily, take Harry and go! It’s him! Go! Run! I’ll hold him off--"

The sounds of someone stumbling from a room -- a door bursting open -- a cackle of high-pitched laughter --

"Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!"

"Stand aside you silly girl … stand aside now."

"Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead--"

"Not Harry! Please … have mercy … have mercy…"

A shrill voice laughing and the woman screaming. A blinding green flash and a burning pain in his forehead, then a high, cold cruel laugh.

And Harry was looking into Snape’s dark eyes and Snape was looking away, hiding his expression behind his hair. Harry twisted his hands together, not sure what was real and what wasn’t. His mother’s scream echoed in his mind.

“I think,” Harry said thickly, “That you teaching me Occlumency is a really terrible idea. Let’s never do this again.”

“Sadly, Mister Potter,” Snape whispered. “We do not always get what we want.”

Professor Snape was cringing. He didn’t think Professor Snape knew how to cringe. Harry felt Voldemort watching them both, and hated him. Hated him, hated his laugh, hating him taking Harry’s mother away, so that the only thing Harry had left was a begging woman’s voice and photos.

Harry swayed on his feet.

*Sit down, child,* Voldemort told him. *I have plans for you that do not involve you cracking your head open on Hogwarts floors.*

“You should sit down, professor,” Harry said, staying where he was.

Professor Snape sat, and gestured Harry into the opposite chair. Harry sat.

They stared at each other. Harry fought to control his breathing and find the calm place in his head that blocked everything out. It took a long time.

“He’s gone,” Harry said, once it was true.

“I will see you Wednesday, Potter,” Professor Snape said. “We will continue your lessons then.”

“…are you…..”

Are you okay.

“Don’t be ridiculous. It was not the first nor will it be the last time the Dark Lord took his frustrations out on me,” Professor Snape said briskly.

“That doesn’t really help.”
“Get out, Potter. Now.”

Harry obeyed.
That evening Harry dragged Fred and George into a frenzied discussion of invisibility charms, potions, candies and enchanted items. Sure, he had an invisibility cloak, but none of his friends did. A candy that made you briefly invisible, now that would be a good trick….

He didn’t talk about Occlumency.

_Harry, dear, you might want to find a little privacy_, Voldemort said in a tone Harry didn’t recognize, just as Harry had finally reached his room.

Harry took a moment to contemplate Voldemort calling him _dear_ after the memory he’d just dug up, lay down on his bed, and muffled his face in his pillow for a good scream.

It turned out it muffled the gleeful cackling laughter quite well, as well.

So, Harry thought muzzily as Neville asked him if he was okay, Voldemort’s strong emotions can break through too. Wonder what he’s so darn happy about.

Harry was half-asleep, having wrestled with clearing his mind before bed for a while and giving it up as a miserable failure, and realized that if he couldn’t occlude, he might as well be a pain in the neck.

So, he thought in Voldemort’s general direction, _What’re you so cheerful about?_

_Oh, Harry. I’m absolutely certain you can read about it in the papers tomorrow. I wouldn’t want to ruin your look of surprise._

_I told my friends over Christmas. Because of the snake._

_Friendship is a wonderful thing._

_You have friends?_

_Harry was rather too tired to censor himself._

_In my own way, I do._

_I really hate you._

_Go to sleep, Harry. Pleasant dreams._

#

In the morning, Harry was feeling steady enough to occlude, and he read in the paper about a mass breakout of Death Eaters from Azkaban. That, he thought grimly, explained that. Between that and the murder of a Department of Mysteries employee, Harry found it pretty easy to keep his focus with his occlumency during the day. The problem was his occlumency lessons, which Harry was now certain were absolutely necessary.

They were just also absolutely horrible.

The second Occlumency lesson, on Wednesday, started much the same as the first. Professor Snape attempted legimency, and browsed through Harry’s memories – he was curious about Harry’s theft of potion ingredients (Harry had been hiding Hermione’s guilt in the matter for years), the extent of
Harry’s dysfunctional relationship with his relatives (Aunt Petunia swinging a frying pan at his head, Uncle Vernon’s hands around his throat), his memories of talking to Voldemort.

*Oh, are we having a lesson again?* Voldemort asked. *I’m a little busy tonight, but I can pitch in.*

*I am capable of teaching occlumency,* Professor Snape replied mentally. *I am a teacher.*

Severus.

*I apologize, my lord.*

*Definitely a lesson-*

Harry visualized perfectly falling off a broom at high speeds, and shoved them *both* out of his mind. He sat down on the floor, panting.

*“Very good, Potter,”* Professor Snape said coolly. *“Again.”*

*“But-“*

*“Again.”*

Harry clambered to his feet.

*“Legimens.”*

(Harry was very small, curled up in his cupboard. Harry was seeing Hogwarts for the first time, awed at people-like-me. Harry was talking to a snake at the zoo.)

*Very well, Severus, you’ve made your point. I am perfectly aware of the parallels. Shall I take a turn?*

*Master, tell me your will and I will obey, but I am somewhat at a loss of what you wish of me.*

*You do trust the boy a great deal,* Voldemort observed. *Not even a pretense of loyalty to your precious Dumbledore?*

Harry thought about Quidditch statistics. The Chudley Cannons might have a chance at the cup this year, well, not really, but Ron held out hope-

*Fool boy,* thought Snape.

*Quite so,* said Voldemort, *Because it makes it obvious you are trying to hide something from me… let’s see.*

(Professor Snape saying no matter what side he’d been on in the last war, he trusted Harry understood his position in the coming one.)

*Tell me, Severus,* Voldemort said, still quietly amused, *What would you do if I ordered you to kill the boy right now?*

*Die, sooner or later,* Snape thought with quiet bitter humor.

A soundless chuckle.

*Harry,* Voldemort added, *Aren’t you supposed to be doing something?*
Harry, who had been distracted from his occlusion by this horrifying turn of conversation, occluded.

So basically, everything was terrible. Snape, who hated the lessons just as much as Harry did, kept them going past the point where Harry could successfully occlude to save his life, until Harry felt tired and strange, like all his insides were on the outsides.

On Friday evening Harry once again had an Occlumency lesson, which ended predictably with Harry with a splitting headache and Snape in vicious humor. They sat in Snape’s office and glared at each other, each unwilling to speak first, knowing that it would just start an argument they’d usually save for a public place.

So, are you really going to let this distract you from your monograph? Voldemort inquired politely.

I may be too tired to occlude, but I don’t have to talk to you.

You realize I’m the only one having fun?

Bloodthirsty maniac. We talked Potions on Tuesday as usual.

Tsk.

Harry decided this was a good time to bang his head on the desk.

“Go to bed, Potter. Before you damage my desk.”

#

On Saturday afternoon, Harry’s year got either better or worse, and he wasn’t quite sure which.

“Mr. Potter. Before we go any further with this – this idea of yours – a few clarifying remarks. Let me make one thing clear – you will achieve an Outstanding in Potions. I do not care if that morning you are battling the Dark Lord or if that afternoon you are in St Mungo’s. You will not embarrass me.”

This apprenticeship plan was definitely one of Harry’s better plans.

“I’m not there yet, am I.”

“At your current level you would pass. If you managed to concentrate, you would manage an Exceeds Expectations.”

“Do I have to occlude during the exam, too?”

“By that point occlusion should be constant enough that you would find it more distracting not to. We are not holding a lesson in occlusion today, Potter.”

Someone knocked on the door. Snape blinked.

“Grading, Potter,” he snapped, and began dismissing his wards with practiced flicks of his wand. Harry settled hurriedly at the main table with a stack of first-year essays. His first-year essays had been this bad, Harry thought tiredly. He didn’t know how he had lived with himself.

Professor Umbridge came in, with her clipboard. Professor Snape, who had unlocked the door, nodded at her and turned to head towards the potions cupboard.

“Professor Snape. Could you explain to me why Potter is here?”
"He is assisting me with grading. Later, he will be sorting oak leaves. We had a delivery, but it’s mixed. Potter, you remember the difference between black and red oak?"

"Yes, sir. Orange fuzz."

On the theory that he’d get angry if he looked at Umbridge, Harry kept his gaze on his grading. No, you couldn’t just leave your boil potion alone for an hour, honestly….

“I accepted Mr. Potter as my apprentice at the beginning of this term,” Professor Snape said. “I mailed in the confirmation to the Ministry at the beginning of this week, in fact.”

“Hem, hem. Yes, I had heard something of the sort. I thought there was some mistake.”

Professor Snape got a large sack of assorted oak leaves out of the supply cupboard and set it on the main table.

“I assure you, Professor Umbridge, I am not prone to making mistakes in my paperwork. Harry James Potter is, admittedly, somewhat young for an apprenticeship, but allowances must be made.”

“For talent?” she asked, seeming drawn in by his low, hypnotic tone.

“Not at all. Potter is an idiot, with no particular talent for the art. No, what Potter has in bushels is sheer idiotic determination. I have yet to find a way to bottle it, but in the meantime, I consider it a service to the community to channel it into something useful.”

She shook herself.

“Be that as it may, Professor Snape, under the circumstances, you must understand that the Ministry has some questions about the arrangement.”

“The circumstances?”

“The current political situation.”

“My apprentice is unlikely to have time for politics in the next,” Snape appeared to pause to consider, “Five years.”

“Mister Potter,” she said sweetly, “Surely you’re concerned this will cut into your time, hem hem, saving the world?”

Harry glanced up at her, and decided, what the hell, he might as well have some fun.

“Well, Professor, I find Potions helps me keep calm. I get jumpy sometimes,” he said with an innocent smile. “And then I don’t quite know what I’m saying. Not much talking with Potions.”

Thoughts seemed to be clicking together behind her eyes.

“There may be a hearing,” she said to Professor Snape.

"Apprenticeships are not within Ministry jurisdiction," he murmured, expression distant. "They are a very old tradition indeed, in fact. We would not want to argue with tradition."

"Be that as it may, Professor Snape. We would not want anyone to take advantage of the situation."

Her gaze flickered sideways towards Harry, and she swept from the room.
“Now,” murmured Snape, once the door was closed again. “Where did you get that idea?”

“Draco used to call it ‘playing to the narrative,’ back when he and I still talked.”

Harry glanced at his professor, who seemed pensive.

That, Harry realized with some startlement, was Snape Expression #13, ‘I would complement you right now if I were prone to such things.’
What We Do For Fun

Apparently, the Boy Who Lived having an apprenticeship was news. Harry found this out when it turned up in the Daily Prophet, below the fold with a scowling picture of Snape.

Everyone, absolutely everyone had an opinion on it.

Ron and Neville wanted to know if he was feeling okay.

Professor McGonagall wanted to know if it was the Prophet was just making things up again, and got quite a pinched look when Harry admitted sheepishly that he’d accepted Professor Snape’s offer.

The Prophet wanted to know if it was a good idea for an unstable young man to add another responsibility to his overburdened shoulders.

The DA mostly thought it took up far too much of Harry’s time, which Harry didn’t argue with.

Even Hagrid hesitantly asked about it. Harry, who was beginning to get the strong impression no one in the whole school knew how he felt about Professor Snape, mumbled something about potions being interesting.

The only person who did not seem to have an opinion on Harry’s apprenticeship was Professor Snape, who was too busy having opinion on Harry’s knife skills, attention span, occlumency, and general timekeeping.

“I will not be shown up by Minerva McGonagall,” Professor Snape hissed at him, over a cloudy potion that stunk of regret and elderberries.

“What does Professor McGonagall have to do with it?”

“She has decided that if one of us can take a Hogwarts student as an apprentice, she can too. She’s chosen Draco Malfoy.”

Harry’s jaw dropped.

“So you,” purred Snape, “Will be the best apprentice this school has ever seen. Start again.”

“Can’t we go back to worrying about murderous madmen?” Harry asked plaintively.

“Start. Again.”

So Harry did.

#

Time sped by. Harry had thought he was busy before, but it was nothing, nothing to the amount of time he lacked now. He wasn’t that fond of sleeping right now anyway, so he skipped it as much as possible and scraped together a few hours to care about the Gryffindor Quidditch team, which was terrible. Hogsmeade Weekend came and went. Harry gave an interview to Rita Skeeter about Voldemort for the Quibbler, and was once again on Professor Umbridge’s short list of people to deal with by any means necessary. He occluded with such fierce clarity that he and Professor Snape could get through an hour’s worth of practice without Harry breaking down at the end into a horrible mess of jagged mental edges. Cho Chang was very pretty.
Harry fell asleep, and dreamed of Voldemort and Rookwood. Voldemort was angry enough at first that he didn’t notice Harry there.

And then he did, as Rookwood was leaving.

_Ah. I should mind my temper, shouldn’t I, Harry? Yes, I’m more and more pleased that I have minded my temper with you._

Harry decided he needed to wake up, now.

He woke up screaming. On Ron’s urging he told Professor Snape about his failure to occlude in his sleep.

It did nothing for Snape’s temper. Which did nothing for Harry’s temper.

Which led, inevitably, to Harry accidentally ending up in his professor’s mind.

Watching a memory of his professor crying as a child, Harry remembered with frightening clarity the time he and Professor Snape had almost talked about Snape’s father.

“Again,” Professor Snape said, as if nothing at all had happened.

This time, they both fell into Voldemort’s mind, in their disarray and emotional turmoil. They were in a corridor – blue light beneath the door –

“Hello, children,” Voldemort said. They weren’t in a corridor at all. Voldemort was sitting in a library, with a small crackling fire in the fireplace. A book of fairy tales was open in his hands.

“Does someone have an explanation for this?”

Neither Harry nor Snape seemed in a hurry to volunteer something.

“Harry. There is a prophecy about you stored in the Department of Mysteries. Severus. Please stop trying to cram an entire lifetime into a few months, the child needs time to breathe. Take him somewhere and do something fun. He has little enough time, you do not need to spend it all going blind in a potions laboratory. Good night.”

Harry was standing in Snape’s office. Snape was staring at him.

A woman screamed outside, and they were both diverted by investigating what turned out to be Professor Trelawney being sacked.

Professor Snape was wearing a hat.

Harry knew that, technically, many people sometimes wore hats, but Harry was still having a hard time with _Professor Snape_ wearing a fuzzy winter hat. It looked like something he’d stolen from Dobby. The professor was also wearing a winter cloak, but that was slightly more normal.

“…Professor?” Harry asked, staring at him.

“We are going out, Potter. Here.”

Professor Snape handed over a dark green winter cloak. Harry stared at this, too. There were a few
things he noted about it.

First, Professor Snape had handed him something.

Second, it was an item of clothing associated with Professor Snape that wasn’t black.

Third, Harry was very confused.

“I’m very confused.”

“Come along, idiot. We are going collecting in the Forest. If you are very unlucky, you will be eaten, but perhaps you should avoid dying of chill first.”

Harry took the hint and put the cloak on.

What followed was very strange. They trudged out of the school, Professor Snape eating up the ground in long flowing strides, past the bounds of the forest. A *lumos* spell lit the way. Professor Snape conjured a basket from nothing and handed it to Harry without a word.

Then, without a word, Professor Snape pounced a mushroom growing on one of the trees near the edge of the forest, and the mushroom tried to run away.

Harry yawned his way through cowardly fungus, pulling fur from a badger by hand (Professor Snape let him wrestle the badger), and harvesting cress from a freezing stream before he said, “Oh, it’s the dark of the moon, isn’t it?”

“Finally, the light dawns,” Professor Snape said. “We’re waiting until midnight when the flowers open, but there’s no reason not to pass the time productively.”

Harry, who could find patterns when they smacked him in the face said, “This is what you do for fun?”

“If you’re good, I’ll let you harvest venom from a rare viper that lairs near here.”

Harry was not sure he understood Snape’s definition of *good*, but Harry tried to be quick and not fall asleep, and it did end up with him spending the witching hour wrestling with a magic viper that didn’t appreciate being woken at midnight.

As Harry pressed the snake venom from the small sponge into the waiting crystal vial, Harry considered whether or not his friends would think Harry’s definition of fun was a little strange.

“Can we do this again?” he asked his teacher.

“When the moon is full.”

Harry, who hadn’t been entirely aware that potions mastery included a dose of adventuring, felt abruptly reconciled with his own career choices.
Battle Formations With Friends

Harry was humming to himself as he worked on his paper for History of Magic when Hermione asked, “Harry?”

He glanced up at her. Surrounding him at the library table were Ron, Hermione, and Neville. Greg and Luna were sitting at the table nearest them, heads bent over newspapers.

“What is it, Hermione?”

“You were humming.”

“Oh. Yes?”

“We’ve been a little worried about you.”

Harry considered this.

“But… things have been going pretty well. It’s been a couple weeks since I had any problems with my scar, Umbridge is convinced I’m such a nutter that being mean to me has no effect, Ron’s doing better at Quidditch, the House Elves are leaving little written messages on the desserts, I like Firenze as a divination teacher.”

“Tell us when you’re happy, you idiot,” she said.

Somehow this ended in a teary hug from Hermione. Harry went along with it, shooting at helpless glance at Ron. Ron shrugged helplessly. A few dates with Cho had not helped Harry understand girls better.

“I think it’s the occlumency,” Harry said, after they had finished with the hugging part. “It makes my emotions a little distant, I guess? It’s not painful or anything.”

“And no problems with, er, you know?” asked Ron.

“Not for… ages. Huh.”

“Good. That was weird.”

Ron, master of understatement.

“If you have time, I could use some help preparing for Greg’s emancipation hearing,” Hermione said. “You’ve seemed so busy, but there’s so much to do. Wizarding emancipation law is much more complicated than magical beasts law, because there’s the matter of who takes responsibility for accidental magic – in the old days it would be an apprentice’s master, but ever since the institution of mass education in the United Kingdom, it’s been much more complicated.”

“Hermione,” Harry said slowly, “What did it used to mean to be an apprentice?”

“It varied depending on the master, of course, but it was some variation on a binding magical contract for labor in exchange for teaching, with the master as the responsible legal party… why?”

“Just… wondering. What did it mean for being an adult?”

“Apprentices weren’t generally adults – they would be adopted into their master’s family for the
interim, of course, since they started at around ten years of age. Very few wizards were trained, because masters had to be selective.”

“That’s interesting,” Harry said, trying desperately to convince himself that he hadn’t heard that right.

“So… Harry was adopted by Snape?” Ron asked, making quite the face.

“Oh, no! No, it’s much more informal and legal these days, no one ever uses the binding magical contracts anymore for apprenticeship or employment – they were so easily abused. Don’t any of you pay attention in History of Magic? It was a factor in the third-to-last Goblin wars.”

“Don’t scare us like that, Hermione,” Ron scolded. “You’re going to turn my hair white.”

“As if Harry would object,” Hermione said tartly.

“Might,” Harry mumbled.

She patted his hand.

“Professor Snape and Sirius, then.”

Harry choked. Ron made fish faces.

Harry managed, “They’d literallly kill each other. I don’t think I’d trust them to sleep in the same house at the same time. Because they’d kill each other.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Harry,” said Hermione, “They’re both grown men and members of the Order!”

Harry, who couldn’t figure out how to convey the level to which grown men could want to kill each other, changed the subject to the most destructive things everyone had ever heard of, still thinking of the locket of evil.

Greg’s suggestion of fiendfyre was not helpful.

“There’s always basilisk venom,” Hermione said absently, flipping through her Ancient Runes textbook.

“…what?”

“Basilisk venom. It’s not used in potions because it’s too destructive, that’s why you didn’t think of it.”

“Basilisk venom.”

Harry got up, books and essay forgotten, and stopped only by a heavy hand on his wrist. He looked up into Greg’s unreadable eyes.

“Where are you going, Harry?” asked Luna dreamily.

“I can get basilisk venom,” Harry said. “I just have to grab my other bag-“

“You’re not going down there again without me!” said Ron, standing. “There could be another one.”

Somehow, Harry was completely unable to stop his study group turning into a group expedition to the Chamber of Secrets.
“I would very much like to see it,” Luna said, and after that Greg wouldn’t budge on escorting her.

Neville’s, “It’s about time I started coming with you for these ideas,” was not helping Harry think it was a good idea. But he grabbed his potions collection bag and his heavy dragonhide gloves (you learn some things wrestling a badger)

“Formations,” said Greg as they regrouped after visiting their dormitories to drop off essays and pick up whatever they thought might be useful “Harry, Hermione, and Ron in front. Me and Neville flank. Luna at the rear for support.”

“We’re not going into battle,” Harry muttered.

“That ever worked before?” Greg asked.

Harry did not have to admit aloud that no, it never had worked before. So he didn’t.

#

“H’lo, Myrtle.”

“Hello, Harry. What are you making today?”

“Actually I’m here for the Chamber.”

“You never visit anymore.”

“Look, I was here last week working in calming draught, wasn’t I?”

“Oh, was that last week? I just don’t have the hang of time anymore.”

Myrtle stopped revolving in a dizzing, worrying up and down spiral and settled into floating cross-legged in midair.

Ron whispered to Harry as an aside, “You come here a lot?”

“I brew stuff for Fred and George’s line here. Can’t do that around Professor Snape;” Harry murmured back.

“Huh,” said Ron. “When d’you sleep?”

Harry shrugged. He wasn’t sure either.

He hissed the Chamber entrance open, and led the way inside.

#

Why was it always spiders? Harry had time to wonder, before they were all too busy casting hexes at the swarm to worry about it. At least these were medium-sized, not giant, spiders – which gave him an idea.

“Give me a minute!” he yelled to Ron and Hermione, over Ron’s frantic mutter of ‘die, spiders, die!’

He stowed his wand and rummaged frantically in a lower pocket, coming out with a slim green bottle. He uncorked it and flung the potion in a glittering green line of liquid at the crowd of spiders, which touched it and shrank down to the size of golf balls, instead of the size of puppies. As more spiders crossed the line of green potion spattering the floor, they too shrank.
And then Ron stepped on them, in a strange maniacal dance, still chanting, “Die, spiders, die!”

Everyone else stopped hexing to watch this.

“Ron,” Hermione said gently, “You can stop now. They’re not aggressive at that age.”

“Oh. Right.”

Ron stomped one more spider, and they waited warily. No more arrived.

“You should share more potions with the class,” said Luna dreamily. “I would like to have more options if I lose my wand.”

“We can talk about it at the next DA meeting,” Harry said, looking around the Chamber warily. It didn’t seem to have any other surprises, other than being half-flooded, full of spiders, and quite dark. Hermione lit the way with lumos, and Harry approached the basilisk skeleton carefully.

He grabbed Neville’s hand right as Neville was about to touch the tip of one fang.

“No! I almost died on one of these, I don’t want to have to explain that to your gran. Carefully, from the base.”

“How many d’you reckon we should take?” Ron asked. “I don’t want to come back here.”

“All of them,” Harry said firmly. “I’m beginning to like being over-prepared.”

They stripped the snake of fangs, putting they away neatly in Harry’s ingredients collection satchel.

“Any of you want one?” Harry asked. “I only really need one.”

“I think we should each have one,” said Luna, “As a momento of our voyage together.”

“Right,” Harry agreed. “I’ll split them up and wrap them so we won’t accidentally kill ourselves. Talk about embarrassing.”

“I don’t think you’d have time to be embarrassed, what with being dead,” Ron said. “Did you see the way I fought those spiders? Wham! Pow!”

Harry clapped Ron on the shoulder, glad someone was having fun.

“Curfew,” Greg said.

And suddenly what had been an orderly expedition dissolved into a scrambled rush through dim corridors, because Umbridge was scarier than a large pack of spiders the size of small dogs.
“Snuffles?” Harry asked his magic mirror uncertainly. He’d never really been sure how secure the mirrors were, so he’d settled for resolving to only use it in an emergency. Which this wasn’t, quite, but he’d been mulling ways to mail the fangs to Sirius for days and the only thing he’d gotten as advice from friends was a lecture from Hermione on the restricted substances act and that she expected him to not get expelled over his obsession with destroying a Hogwarts heirloom.

Harry did not respond that it was the only thing he and Sirius and Kreacher found to get along over, because Hermione was still of the impression that Kreacher was an old dear, somewhere deep down. Deep, deep down, Harry thought.

“Harry! Everything alright?” came Sirius’s deep voice. Something inside Harry relaxed.

“I found something that I think might work on the thing,” Harry said, keeping his voice down. He was hiding in his room, but you never knew, really. Malfoy might be lurking under the bed.

“Really? Great. Tell me and I’ll pick it up.”

“It’s a restricted substance. But, um, I may have found one. Here. I’m just not sure how to get it to you, what with Umbridge.”

“Hm. How big is it?”

“About the size of a wallet.”

Sirius changed the subject, inquiring about Harry’s classes and friends, and Harry let him. They chatted for a few minutes.

“We’d better not talk to long. You’d better send it with Snape,” Sirius said reluctantly.

“…what?”

“Potions masters have standard permits for most restricted substances, and he can leave the school without a problem. Wrap it up, don’t tell him what it is, and we’ll see if it gets to me. A sort of test.”

Harry tried to visualize himself asking Professor Snape to deliver a present for Sirius.

“C’mon, Harry. Don’t be a chicken.”

“I’m not-“

“Bawk bawk bawk,” Sirius said helpfully.

“Fine. Argh.”

Sirius chuckled.

“Lily always fell for that one too,” he said, and then the mirror dimmed into inactivity.

Harry was left breathless for a moment. Was he more like his mum than his dad? He’d always sort of wished he was more bold, like he’d heard his dad was, but if he reminded Sirius of his mum… that was almost as good, somehow.
So, in the end, that was what Harry did. Professor Snape gave Harry a look, but he didn’t argue with the request, accepting the package with a curt, “Do not make a habit of this, Potter.”

#

Greg could not make a Patronus. Not a silver shimmer, not a glitter of mist. Nothing. Harry’d talked to him about it, or tried, but all he’d gotten was a shrug.

“What if you thought about Luna?” Harry asked, more grumpy than hopeful at this point. Greg frowned at the middle distance.

“Reckon I’m no good at it,” he said. “Not good at most spells.”

“You don’t care how well you do in classes,” Harry pointed out. “You do fine in dueling.”

“That’s different.”

“How?”

“I like hurting people.”

Harry wished desperately for patience, and for Draco to take his minion back already. Except, no, because Luna would be sad. And Harry was growing rather attached to her whimsical attitude, which rather matched his own at times.

“…right. Well, it’s just supposed to be happy, it’s not necessarily supposed to be nice. How about a time you were really happy hurting someone?”

Greg’s expression softened from grim sullenness into thought.

“Expecto patronum,” he barked, and for a moment, a fluffy silver tail flickered in the air before dissipating.

Draco Malfoy, the cat patronus. Harry moved on to his next victim, absolutely and firmly resolving to never ask Greg what his happy memory was.

“I was thinking,” he was saying to Hermione, “I liked the way we did things in the Chamber the other day – we should get the DA working on small teams, like auror partners or trios.”

And then Dobby showed up to warn them, and the DA scattered.

Harry got himself tripped by Draco Malfoy, who took the opportunity to smirk at him.

The meeting with Fudge and Umbridge was a delightful example of how to lie to government officials. Harry would have appreciated it more if he was less tense about the results. So many of his friends would do terribly if expelled – Hermione, Greg. It couldn’t be worse timing, when everyone had just started to get good, but before they were really smooth and practiced.

Dumbledore, Harry thought with awe, was still his role model. Sneaky as a Slytherin, brazen as a Gryffindor, clever as a Ravenclaw. And, he noticed, during his admiring stare at the professor, Professor Dumbledore believed in having pockets.

“Professor Dumbledore,” Harry blurted out, “Would you like a bag of lemon candy?”

“I would be delighted, Harry,” Dumbledore said, still watching Fudge calmly, having just threatened to break out of Azkaban. “Put it on the desk there, I’m afraid Minister Fudge may force me to draw
my wand in a moment.”

Harry put the bag of candy on the table, and vowed silently to make sure Professor Dumbledore never, ever ran out of sweets. Not ever. The color of Fudge’s face.

And before Dumbledore left in a flash of fire, he snagged the bag of lemon candy from the broken ruins of his desk. Harry felt rather warm about that.

“Of course, I expect she really fancied herself sitting up there in the Head’s office,” said Hermione viciously, as they walked up the stone steps into the Entrance Hall. “Lording it over all the other teachers, the stupid puffed-up, power-crazy old—“

“Now, do you really want to finish that sentence, Granger?”

Draco Malfoy had slid out from behind the door, closely followed by Crabbe. His pale, pointed face was alight with malice.

“I don’t know, Malfoy, do I?” she asked, staring him down.

“The Inquisitorial Squad, which includes myself and Vince here, has been detailed to take House points from those displaying a shocking lack of loyalty to the Ministry.” He looked Hermione up and down. “I’ll let you off with a warning, Granger, if you grovel.”

“I wouldn’t want to get you in trouble,” Hermione said with vicious sweetness. “Go on.”

Harry was really beginning to remember why he’d hated Draco in the first place.

Fred and George’s plans for mayhem did not cheer Harry up much, because Harry knew some of the things they’d been working on together, and it was too easy to imagine what sort of mayhem those could cause, if set loose properly.

Then she tried to drug him. Him. Moody and Professor Snape would kill him if he let himself be drugged by an enemy. Voldemort would probably track him down to torture him if he was that careless around Umbridge. Not to mention anything relaxing inhibitions would do something terrible to his occlumency. Harry suspected that the only reason Voldemort hadn’t been absently suggesting ways to torture her all term was because Harry had successfully managed to block his casual interest. Which was probably good. Harry was not sure exactly how well he would have dealt with that particular devil on his shoulder.

Well, two could play at that game.

“Would you like a chocolate, Professor?” Harry asked. “They go very nicely with tea.”

“No, Potter, I do not want a chocolate. I want you to drink your tea.”

Harry blinked innocently at her, doing his best Luna impression.

“My newest ones are raspberry flavored.”

“Drink your tea, Potter,” she said gently. “You don’t have to worry about chocolates right now. I think you’ve been very confused, and the tea will help.”

“Oh, good,” Harry murmured, and pretended to sip his tea.
“Now, I want you to tell me where Albus Dumbledore is.”

“Probably not Hogwarts.”

“Probably?”

“He could be hiding in a room full of chamber pots,” Harry said mildly.

Her fingers clenched on her teacup. Harry watched with interest, and pretended to have another sip of tea.

“Where is Sirius Black?” she snapped out suddenly.

“The last time I read the papers, they said he might be hiding in London,” Harry mused, “But they haven’t been very reliable.” Now, what could he add to this little performance…. “I’m very curious where exactly he is right now.”

Sirius could be upstairs feeding Buckbeak, or downstairs making lunch, or destroying that locket with Kreacher. It would be very interesting to know where Sirius was.

And then they were neatly interrupted by Fred and George, and never had Harry been more happy with a diversion in his life.

#

Harry thought the release of bouncy green hair care potions on the general populace of the school was a bit much, but he rather liked the personalities the twins’ potions developed – instead of one big ball of slime, they split into a dozen tiny green bouncing balls of goo, and went for anyone who came near them.

Filch had never looked so good, Harry thought happily, casting finite on one that came for his head, and stepping back sharply to watch the fireworks.

That night, Hermione congratulated Fred and George and said, “But, oh, you’re going to be expelled, I’m sure of it.”

Fred patted her shoulder.

“Don’t worry about us, Hermione.”

“No, it’s just.” She squared her shoulders. “I would like to buy a selection of fake wands, please. As many different lengths and colors as you have. I expect by this time next week you won’t be here to accept orders.”

George laughed, and shortly Hermione was the proud owner of twenty or so fake wands.

“What d’you want with all those?” Ron asked, eyeing them with some confusion.

“Never you mind, Ronald Weasley.”

“Bite my head off, why don’t you,” he muttered, and went back to the firework celebration.

Harry didn’t dream that night.

#
In a different reality, when Draco interrupted Harry’s occlumency lesson Harry looked into a bowl full of memories and met a different side of his father. In this reality, Harry had a full and clear understanding about Professor Snape’s reaction to that breach of privacy, and went the safer route of getting ahead on his grading. In many ways, Harry was probably happier for it.

Having Umbridge sitting in on his career advice session was… something. Harry plastered a placid smile on his face.

“Well, Potter, I think you have a clearer idea than most I talk to about your career after Hogwarts.”

“I want to be a potions master,” Harry responded. “And make candy.”

“You will need very good potions grades for that, of course, and I understand that herbology, care of magical creatures and defense against the dark arts are all considered very useful in the personal collection of ingredients.”

Dolores Umbridge then went on to have a strong opinion about Harry’s Defense marks, but Harry didn’t mind that so much.

“Have you considered what you would do once you achieved your mastery?” McGonagall asked, getting the meeting back on track. “Many places employ potions masters, including Hogwarts, St Mungos, the Ministry—”

“The Ministry,” Harry interrupted. “Ron wants to be an Auror and Hermione wants to be an undersecretary in charge of sorting things out, so I think it would be nice to work there with them.”

Dolores Umbridge did not like that at all.

Harry had actually just said it to see what color her face would turn – he’d rather thought he should go into business with Fred and George – but the longer he thought about it, the more he liked the idea. Him, Ron, and Hermione, fighting darkness and running the country together, with him making all the Polyjuice and healing potions they could ever want.

Turned out career advice really was helpful.
Fred and George left school in a blaze of drama and light that Harry admired more than fire burned. Harry’s main problem in the highly amusing weeks of troublemaking that followed was that he was barely sleeping, and Professor Snape gave him a firm and scathing lecture on potions experts who abused their own stock – complete with examples – and ended up with cross-contamination from taking too many different potions at once.

Harry, who had accidentally combined too much calming draught and too much sleeping draught and slept from Friday morning through Monday, took the lecture without too much comment. He had, after all, deserved it.

Professor Snape seemed content to end their occlumency lessons aside from the occasional check-in, and was much calmer during potions lessons now that Voldemort wasn’t putting in his two cents at every opportunity. He had, however, remembered that Harry had a monograph to write as well as OWLs to complete, and Harry was thoroughly convinced that he never, ever wanted to see another potion in his life.

His complete confusion was completed by Ron, Hermione, and Neville asking him to demonstrate how to make an OWL-level potion for them.

“…me?” he asked them, staring at them blankly.

“You’re the best in our class at Potions, Harry,” Hermione said briskly. “You passed me and Malfoy ages ago. I want to do well.”

“I’m the best in our class at potions?”

“You didn’t know that?” asked Ron.

“Well… no. I thought I was still more like… like….”

“You’ve been taking extra potions lessons four or five nights a week all year, Harry,” Neville said. “What were they for if not for to make you better?”

Harry fought the urge to say that more than half of them were just to stop him going crazy, and the other half was mostly to stop Professor Snape from going crazy with the demands on his time. It was all grading and ingredient preparation and memorizing lists and pepper-up and dreamless sleep and the occasional foray into polyjuice and wolfsbane theory, but it wasn’t-

He wasn’t-

“I’m the best in our class at potions?” he repeated.

“Yes, Harry,” Hermione said patiently. “And I want to see how you make the….”

Harry made three different potions for them, laying his ingredients out in order in the girl’s restroom, starting his cauldrons, and adding his ingredients, moving between them with absent calm. He’d figured out the trick to occluding with potions, and it seemed like a good moment to practice.

“Mate,” Ron said slowly, when Harry’s three potions were simmering and Harry had paused to lean on the bathroom sink and wait, “Why aren’t you like this in class?”
Harry shrugged.

“I’ve got you and Hermione to talk to in class, don’t I? And I have to keep an eye out for Crabbe and Malfoy mucking with our potions. It’s hard to concentrate. Much easier here, or in the evenings.”

“I always get so nervous, during potions lessons,” Neville observed quietly.

“The examinations should be a lot better,” Harry told him. “No Snape, no audience. Just you and the cauldron.”

“And the examiner,” Neville pointed out.

“Pretend they’re not there. Hermione, does that answer your question?”

“You didn’t follow the recipe at all,” she said accusingly.

“Sure I did.”

“But you crushed your beans instead of cutting them-“

“I crushed them a little before cutting them, that’s all. Gets the juice flowing. It’s just a variation, I won’t lose points for it.”

Harry found he rather liked being the one with the most to say about one subject. It filled a hole that Quidditch had left. Maybe now he could say he wasn’t really good at anything except Quidditch and potions….

#

Harry survived his OWLs. Hagrid survived Umbridge’s attempt to sack him.

Harry fell asleep during his History of Magic examination the next day, and dreamed.
Hello, Harry. I was expecting you last night, but I’m glad you’re finally here. Have you not been sleeping well?

Voldemort had been looking in a mirror, all white face and red eyes, and he turned to face someone – Wormtail.

“Fetch Severus for me, Wormtail. Tell him it’s time for him to hear his part in tonight’s events.”

Harry stayed silent, because if he was here, he might as well eavesdrop – Voldemort had eavesdropped on him, often enough. What was Voldemort planning? Since when had Professor Snape left Hogwarts? Harry had been busy with OWLs, but he was sure he’d seen him at lunch yesterday….

Snape knelt in the circle of light in the middle of the dark room. Voldemort paced around the room, circling slowly, watching Snape.

“You know I have been looking for Sirius Black.”

“Yes, master. I am still unable to break the Fidelius charm.“

“I do not expect you to. Have you wondered why I wish Sirius Black found?”

“To use him against the Potter boy, I assumed.”

“No, Severus,” Voldemort said with cool amusement. “I have another reason for seeking Black. After all, if I wish to strike at Potter through his loved ones, there is one much closer to hand.”

“I don’t understand, master.”

“It seems to have passed both you and Dumbledore by – amazing. Usually I find myself always one step behind the man, and here I am, one step ahead. The boy loves you, very dearly, fiercely, with his whole heart.”

Voldemort was at an angle that allowed him to watch the expression freeze on Professor Snape’s face. Harry felt Voldemort’s quiet delight. Voldemort began circling again, footsteps soft.

“I’m not sure this would have worked at the beginning of this year – you were doing such a good job keeping your distance. But I have always found that shared adversity brings people together.”

“…I had wondered at your goals, master.”

“You will help Lord Voldemort send a message to Potter, won’t you, my Severus?”

Voldemort had circled around behind Professor Snape now, and Harry felt the wand cool in his hand, as they leveled it at his professor’s back.

“Yes, master. It would be my honor,” Snape whispered.

Harry wanted to protest, to shout, but nothing he said seemed to have an effect – he seemed only a ghost, as he’d been in the snake at Christmas. He needed to wake up, he needed to stop this.

“Good. Crucio.”
Snape collapsed in that circle of light, limbs jerking blackly. Like a spider, caught in its own web.

_Harry, Voldemort thought quite clearly, I need you to run a small errand for me. There is a prophecy in the Department of Mysteries, a small glowing orb with your name on it. You will be able to touch it. The sooner you get it for me, the sooner we can cease this particular game. Don’t worry – I’m quite skilled with the Cruciatus, unlike my dear Bella. If you move quickly, we should be able to avoid any permanent damage... you must agree that would be inconvenient. Once you have it, I will arrange to pick it up._

Harry woke up in the Great Hall examination room, yelling, his scar on fire.
The Department of Mysteries

After the initial shock wore off and Harry got out of his blasted History of Magic exam, Harry felt very clearheaded. He went to find Professor McGonagall, who was missing. He checked Professor Snape’s office, which was empty, the fire dark.

He went to find Ron and Hermione.

He kept feeling very clear-headed until he was trying to explain why storming the Department of Mysteries was the correct solution to the problem, and they wouldn’t listen. They didn’t understand.

“I’m going,” he finally settled on flatly. “I don’t care if it’s mad. If I don’t do something, he’ll end up being killed. I think I’ve learned something about how Voldemort thinks, this past year. This way, at least there’s a chance. A fight, maybe, but what have we been practicing for, if not a fight?”

Their arguments were buzzing in his ear. He was yelling at Hermione, Hermione was accusing him of having a saving people thing.

Luna and Ginny were interrupting, and the flicker of Draco’s tail in the doorway – Harry didn’t have time for Draco right now. Harry ignored him.

“But there’s Sirius, isn’t there?” Hermione asked. “We can contact him, somehow. He can tell the Order.”

Harry tried the mirror and got no response at all. So he tried calling Sirius in the fire in Professor Umbridge’s office, and got Kreacher. Kreacher, who told him that Sirius was out, and they were busy anyway, too busy for horrible boys.

“Tell him to call me,” Harry said shortly, and ended the floo call.

He should make sure he was prepared. He should have made a potion for the after-effects of the Cruciatus. He should have thought of it.

Umbridge, as was her wont, interrupted, complete with goon squad. Greg, who was on the goon squad, played his part to a T.

Hermione burst into tears.

“Oh, Professor, I just didn’t know what to do. Professor Dumbledore said that we had to do as he said, or we’d have to leave school.”

“Well, you shall do as I say, or you shall do worse than leave school,” Professor Umbridge said firmly.

Hermione fell into her arms, sobbing, or perhaps tackled her. Greg turned his wand on Crabbe, Draco turned into a cat, and Harry felt like he should be doing something, so he stunned one of the accomplices just for a change.

Hermione methodically applied memory charms, except on Draco, who she missed as he bolted down the stairs.

“…what did you do to Umbridge?” Harry asked, rather intimidated and thoroughly in love.

“I stole your horrible contact poison you kept around just in case you couldn’t stand her anymore,
because I thought that was too much of a temptation for you.”

“…I’m not entirely sure what all the effects will be,” Harry said faintly.

“We don’t have time to stick around to find out,” she said firmly. “And she was going to torture you, Harry. Again.”

“Luna’s waiting in the forest,” said Greg. “She had an idea.”

“…a good idea?” asked Hermione.

“Yes.”

“Why’s he being so quiet?” asked Ron.

“I think he’s working on his occlusion,” said Hermione. “I imagine it’s difficult right now.”

“I don’t have time for this,” Harry said, and went to see what Luna’s bright idea was. It had better involve transport or something practical.

It was thestrals.

Harry’s friends were really great. Why they were *coming*, Harry wasn’t really sure, but when he said that, Greg was the first to respond.

“He’s my head of house, not yours.”

“I’m his-“ Harry cut himself off. “Fine.”

Fine. Greg seemed to have Ginny, Luna, and Neville organized, for whatever value that imparted. Harry was just going to find the thing, steal it, break it into a thousand pieces, rescue Professor Snape, and kick Voldemort out of the British Isles on his ass.

Harry could admit that he needed to work on the fine details of his plan. But riding thestral-back was good thinking time, if he could unlock his emotions enough to think.

Oh, *there* was the panic and rage and hatred and-

Harry thought about what the thestral ride was like, instead, right up until his mirror chimed.

“Harry? Sorry, got a little caught up in our little project. It’s pretty exciting, actually-“

“I’m breaking into the Department of Mysteries to fight Voldemort.”

“What.”

“I’m breaking into the Department of Mysteries to fight Voldemort, and I promised someone a long time ago I’d tell an adult before I did something this stupid. So. You’re my adult.”

“Why the *hell* would you do something like that, Harry? Stay where you are, I’m coming to you.”

“He has something I need. So I’m going. Come or don’t, I’ll be fine.”

Or not. Harry didn’t really care, at this point. He ended the call, and stuffed the mirror deep into his deepest pocket.

#
His visitor badge for the Ministry said ‘Harry Potter, Rescue Mission.’ Harry really could appreciate
the wizarding world sometimes.

The way to the Department of Mysteries was clear. Of course it was clear, Voldemort was
competent, wasn’t he? Harry hated that about him.

Eventually, they reached Row 97. And there was the glowing glass sphere, just as ordered. Harry
stared at it. He really should just smash it. It was about him, was it? Voldemort had said that ages
ago, back when Voldemort had been playing at being – not nice, precisely, but not his full, brutal
self. Playing a different game.

*Harry lifted the glass ball down from its shelf and stared at it.*

*Nothing whatsoever happened. The others moved in closer around Harry, gazing at the orb as he
brushed it free of the clogging dust.*

*And then, from right behind them, a drawling voice spoke.*

“Very good, Potter. Now turn around, nice and slowly, and give that to me.”

Black shapes were emerging out of thin air all around them, blocking their way left and right; eyes
glinted through slits in hoods, a dozen lit wand tips were pointing directly at their hearts; Ginny gave
a gasp of horror.

“To me, Potter,” repeated the drawling voice of Lucius Malfoy as he held out his hand, palm up.

*Harry’s insides plummeted sickeningly. They were trapped, and outnumbered two to one.*

“To me,” said Malfoy yet again.

“Where is he?” Harry asked, unwilling even now to name the person he was concerned about.

Back and forth they went, mocking, the woman saying it was all just a dream – had it been, had it
really? Surely it was not possible that something that awful had just been a dream. Was Snape really
on Voldemort’s side? Had it all been – been a trick?

Harry found it very easy to find the anger and resolve to raise his wand. He distracted Bellatrix
briefly, taunted her briefly, and then bought time frantically as he asked questions about the
prophecy. There was only one small difference between another universe and this one, and that was
this – Harry did not use Voldemort’s name in vain, and so did not anger Bellatrix Lestrange into
firing a stunner at him.

And then they were smashing shelves of prophecies and running, splitting apart, and the clear rush of
adrenaline made Harry sure and calm as anything, aside from the terror. Neville and Hermione were
with him, and they were a good three-man team. And then Hermione was injured, Neville bleeding.

“Take this, and these,” Harry said. “The potion’s healing, the candy’s half an hour of invisibility – go
raise the alarm, don’t use the candy unless you have to, it has some weird side effects a day after
use.”

“I’m not leaving you,” Neville said, nose running with blood, but he took a swig of the healing
potion and helped Harry give a swallow to Hermione, kicked his old wand out of the way, and they
were off on another leg of the let’s run around with people trying to kill us circus.

Then they found the rest of them, his brave idiots. Harry was frustrated to find that he should have
packed a bone-healing potion for Ginny and something for the mind for Ron, but Hermione was stirring and Neville had stopped bleeding and no one was dead, so Harry counted it good. Harry’s healing potion was used up on Ginny, with a quick whispered, “It won’t repair the bone but it’ll help with the pain, but it’s still broken, okay?”

Ginny nodded, eyes grave, and Harry called it good. At least Greg was a good carrier.

Then it all went wrong, somehow, friends stunned, Neville under the Cruciatus. Where was Greg? Harry had seen Ginny fall, but he’d lost Greg a few minutes ago.

Then it all seemed like it was going right, with Sirius and the Order arriving, and then wrong again. Harry was busy dealing with Lucius Malfoy, but he saw Bellatrix Lestrange take a stunner in the back from – was that a Death Eater? No, that was Greg in a mask, good for you Greg, and then Harry was too busy trying to stay alive to worry about Greg anymore.

Dumbledore was there. It would all be alright, Dumbledore was there. No one was left fighting, Harry could – no, Harry couldn’t relax. There was still Professor Snape to worry about. Who was not here, and Harry had smashed the prophecy by accident in his rush to keep from being murdered with all his friends with it in hand.

Sirius was shaking him.

“If you don’t get us all killed tonight I’m going to string you up by your heels, Harry! What were you thinking?”

“He just finally figured out the right lie to tell me to get me to come here. He’s been trying all year. I don’t have time for this.”

“Make time,” Sirius snarled.

Harry stared at him.

“I have to occlude right now.”

Bellatrix Lestrange was back on her feet, and Greg was falling, bleeding all over the floor, and she was running.

It seemed unlikely that Greg would survive being cut almost in half.

“Accio blood replenishment potion,” Harry said, because his pockets took too long, and then he tossed it at Lupin and was running after Bellatrix, because that was his friend and he was angry and he needed answers.

#

“Nothing there!” he shouted. “Nothing to summon! It smashed and nobody heard what it said, tell your boss that!”

“No!” she screamed. ‘It isn’t true, you’re lying! MASTER, I TRIED, I TRIED--DO NOT PUNISH ME—“

“Don’t waste your breath!” yelled Harry, his eyes screwed up against the pain in his scar, now more terrible than ever. “He can’t hear you from here!”

“Can’t I, Potter?” said a high, cold voice.
Harry opened his eyes.

“Where is he?”

“It is no concern of yours now, Potter.”

Voldemort was diverted by Bellatrix begging (so strange, to hear how Voldemort's Death Eaters talked about him).

“I have one question to ask you, before I end this,” Voldemort continued, in that same calm, cool tone, as if Harry was an item on his to do list and not a very interesting one at that. “Did you ever finish that monograph?”

Harry’s jaw dropped open.

“…what?”

“A pity. I suppose I’ll have to dig up the unfinished draft.”

At which point Voldemort was interrupted by an attacking golden statue, as people so often are.
The fight between Voldemort and Dumbledore was over, and Dumbledore, frightened, told Harry to stay where he was.

And then Harry found out that Voldemort had been lulling him into a sense of complacency all year, testing his occlumency barriers without really trying them, making Harry feel confident in his own skills, which now seemed so brittle.

Harry drowned in pain.

Harry was reminded that really, he had more important things to do than be in pain. He needed to ask Voldemort a question now, thanks, he didn’t have time to continue his little feud with Dumbledore with whatever Voldemort’s next bright plan was.

Where is he, Harry thought, through their strange connection, and felt no pain.

I returned him to Hogwarts. Perhaps if you ask, he will even tell you what happened.

I’m done talking to you now, Harry thought gently.

Harry put his glasses on, and met Dumbledore’s eyes.

“Are you alright, Harry?”

“I think I finally got the hang of this occlumency thing,” Harry informed him thoughtfully. “I was trying too hard. It really is just like the imperius, isn’t it?”

Dumbledore pulled Harry to his feet, and then was quite busy with the Minister of Magic.

Make time, Sirius had snarled at him. Harry frowned, and pulled out his communication mirror.

“Sirius?”

“Harry. Where are you?”

“Up here with Dumbledore. It’s… fine. Everything’s fine.”

“If you think – you little-”

“Sirius means to say,” interrupted Remus, “That he’s very happy you’re okay, and we’ll be up shortly. There’s been a little bit of confusion here about who exactly is being taken prisoner. I’m hoping we can talk our way out of being arrested, for once.”

“That was one time, Remus,” Harry heard Sirius protest, and grinned. Sirius, at least, sounded okay. Good.

#

Harry took the portkey, and was in Dumbledore’s office. He had a half an hour, did he? Well, Harry hadn’t gotten tired of sprinting yet- but the door was locked.

Harry was quite tense about the door being locked, until Dumbledore arrived.
“Well, Harry,” said Dumbledore, finally turning away from the baby bird that was, “you will be pleased to hear that none of your fellow students are going to suffer lasting damage from the night’s events.”

Harry nodded jerkily.

“Madam Pomfrey is patching everybody up,” said Dumbledore. “Nymphadora Tonks may need to spend a little time in St. Mungos, but it seems she will make a full recovery.”

“What about Professor Snape?”

“Did you have reason to believe he was in danger?”

“A dream. A vision, I suppose. Staged for my benefit.”

“I see.”

A heaviness seemed to enter Professor Dumbledore’s eyes.

“I shall certainly do my best to locate him, if indeed he is in danger.”

“Can I go try his quarters, sir? Just in case.”

“Certainly! And I shall accompany you.”

Having Professor Dumbledore walking next to him was very strange, in what had been very unfriendly Hogwarts halls. He was rather a magic spell to get any unfriendly Slytherin faces to turn and walk the other way.

“We haven’t been very honest with each other this year, have we, sir?” Harry asked.

“No, I suppose we have not. Which was my mistake, Harry.”

“It’s one I make all the time.” Harry made sidelong not-quite-eye-contact with his Professor. He was getting very good at not-quite-eye-contact. “I promised Professor Snape years ago I’d tell an adult before I did anything spectacularly dangerous.”

“Did you? How spectacularly sensible of you. I was never quite so sensible, in my youth.”

“Greg’s really okay?”

“Yes, and he apparently took the opportunity to opportune the Minister about his emancipation hearing. The Minister seemed quite amenable.”

“Was Greg still absolutely covered in blood?”

“Quite so.”

“Sounds like Greg. He’s a scary kid.”

“If one thing saddens me about Tom more than any other, it is that he involves children in his wars.”

“Are you really going to keep me out of it until I’m of age, professor? I mean… I’m rather in it, it seems to me.”

“If I can, my boy, if I can.” For a moment, the headmaster looked very tired. “In the spirit of honesty,
perhaps you could explain why you are concerned about Professor Snape?”

Harry glanced around for eavesdroppers, then decided he didn’t care.

“Voldemort was torturing him, because he said I loved him and… wouldn’t I know if I loved someone, professor?”

“Love is a terrible and beautiful force, Harry. People are capable of the very strongest efforts and magics through love. If Tom used love to provoke you, that was his mistake,” the headmaster said absently, seeming lost in thought.

“I think his mistake was losing his temper and coming himself when his people failed,” Harry said. “He would have been able to stay hidden and say it was just Mr. Malfoy’s stupid plan otherwise.”

“Yes… on that note, Harry, do you have any information that could explain Lucius Malfoy’s wand turning into quite a handsome trout when he was booked for sentencing? It has everyone somewhat puzzled.”
Harry paused on the stairs, and Professor Dumbledore helpfully paused as well, waiting.

“No,” Harry said slowly. “Well – one suspicion, but it seems stupid.”

“You have proven to have good instincts, Harry. I would be interested to hear your theory.”

“Well…” Harry started trotting down the steps again. “I was distracted, but I think I remember Draco overhearing some of me telling Hermione and Ron something was up. I don’t see how that connects to his father getting one of Fred and George’s trick wands, though.”

“Perhaps it would make the connection clear if you understand that Lucius is using this opportunity to claim he was there only to try to talk sense into all parties involved. Indeed, if he had been there for battle, would he not have brought a real wand?”

“He’s not going to get out of it, is he?” Harry asked, horrified. He’d rather looked forward to some Death Eaters being back in prison for a while.

“I shall lend my considerable input towards him not ‘getting out of it,’ but I fear that he will be treated leniently. The Minister is quite eager for his friend to have been true, if misguided.”

Huh.

“Perhaps the rest of that discussion is best left for another time. Tell me, what did Tom mean about a monograph?”

“I know that you know that he and I have had a connection for a while, since he came back,” Harry said, juggling clauses. “But you didn’t know that I knew that I had that connection, because he and I could talk to each other. He tried to be charming. I was being stubborn and waiting for you to talk to me, which was… stupid, in retrospect? It was stupid at the time, too, I was just… scared.”

“I do not think less well of you for not having been able to immediately block a wizard of Voldemort’s caliber from your mind, Harry,” Dumbledore said gently.

“But I didn’t really… try. Professor Snape pointed me at occlumency in my second year at school, but I was curious about Voldemort. It’s my besetting sin, curiousity.”

“It is not your fault, Harry.” In a low, serious voice, Dumbledore continued, “Nothing he does is your fault.”

“But if I hadn’t grabbed that portkey last year, he’d still be mostly dead.” Harry quailed at Dumbledore’s expression and said, “I just think about it sometimes.”

“Understandably. I would, however, trust your friends to remind you that you are most decidedly not Lord Voldemort.”

Dumbledore knocked firmly on Professor Snape’s door.

“Enter,” said a calm, familiar, (beloved) voice.

Professor Snape was sitting in an armchair, just as if it was a normal day. His eyes were sunken, his robes in subtle disarray, but he was there.
“Headmaster,” Snape greeted him with a nod before he turning his attention to Harry. "Potter, you idiot."

Quite as if it was a normal day, really.

“Sorry. I – sorry.”

“I do not claim any talent for the Second Sight, Potter, but I have had a vision. In this vision, you did something so monumentally, blazingly stupid that even I, who expect very little of you, would have been shocked.”

Harry was so overwhelmed by the sheer Snape of this comment that he could think of nothing to say.

“If ever you intimate that you will do any such thing again, I will give in to my normal impulse and kill you and then myself,” Snape said, quite as if discussing the weather.

“…are you alright, sir?”

“That depends. Am I likely to be required to stand or fight in the next day or so?” Professor Snape addressed this question to the headmaster, who had until then been observing quietly.

“Voldemort and his Death Eaters were confronted in the Department of Mysteries and driven back,” Professor Dumbledore said gravely. “The prophecy was not revealed, and our side suffered no casualties. You may rest easily, Severus.”

“Um,” said Harry, and drew both their attention. Eek. “…Hermione may have poisoned Umbridge and I may need help making sure the antidote doesn’t kill her. Sir.”

Professor Snape burst out in rusty, cackling laughter.

“Are you hurt, Severus?” Dumbledore asked.

Snape held up a hand, his only movement since they’d come into the room. It trembled, faintly.

“You will need a restorative, then,” Dumbledore said calmly. “I shall make some directly.”

“I’m afraid I shall be less useful, from now on,” Snape said, looking away from both of them, face hidden behind his hair. “I assured him of my loyalty, but he is aware I am... compromised. In the matter of Potter.”

“My friend, to have you back safe, I do not care if the only thing you do for the rest of your life is inform first years that they are dunderheads.”

“Spare me,” Snape said dryly. “Please.”

“Ah, Severus. You have the summer before you must again subject yourself to students.”

“Mm,” Snape agreed.

“You will let me know if you need anything else I can provide. I shall leave you with one happy thought, to keep you company: Lucius Malfoy was tricked with a fake wand, courtesy of Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes, if I am not mistaken, and has to explain to a court why he deliberately carried a wand that turned into a trout upon the application of magic. Come along, Harry. I believe Severus wishes to be alone.”
Harry let Dumbledore guide him from the room with a gentle hand, and glanced back worriedly over his shoulder. Professor Snape was smiling faintly.

Only once the door was closed did Dumbledore say, “He has never liked anyone to see that he is human. Come back up to my office, Harry. There are a few things we must still discuss in privacy.”

“You see,” Dumbledore continued, “I believed it could not be long before Voldemort attempted to force his way into your mind, to manipulate and misdirect your thoughts, and I was not eager to give him more incentives to do so. I was sure that if he realised that our relationship was--or had ever been--closer than that of headmaster and pupil, he would seize his chance to use you as a means to spy on me. I feared the uses to which he would put you, the possibility that he might try and possess you. Harry, I believe I was right to think that Voldemort would have made use of you in such a way. On those rare occasions when we had close contact, I thought I saw a shadow of him stir behind your eyes …”

“You were right,” Harry said heavily, sinking himself into a chair. “I think he used me to spy on Professor Snape, because he was suspicious of him. He kept turning up to watch potions tutoring.”

“Perhaps you should tell me a little about that. I am realizing that I have missed much, in trusting Severus’ reports… his only true blind spot is himself, it seems.”

“I don’t - what?”

“He managed to convey that you hated each other and only tolerated each other’s company for the sake of teaching, without saying so in so many words. Even when he agreed to take you as his apprentice, he was firm in his conviction that it was just an empty title chosen out of spite.”

“I don’t know what he thinks of me,” Harry said carefully. “But I think I know him pretty well, and I… I…. I’m half tempted to cut off all contact with him and pretend to hate him, just to keep him from being hurt again.”

“I think, Harry, that that would hurt him very deeply. He is a hard man to know, but you must believe that-”

“I know,” Harry interrupted. “He knew my mum. I guess you knew that, since you taught them?”

“I did,” Dumbledore said, twinkling behind his glasses. “I’m surprised he told you.”

“He didn’t. Aunt Petunia did, ages ago.” Harry hesitated. “She made it sound… sordid.”

“I will not betray any confidences, but if I may feel free to correct something… yes, I shall feel free to correct this. Severus’ feelings for Lily were not sordid in the least.”

Harry summoned up a small smile from somewhere, and yawned.

“There is only one more thing we must discuss, Harry, if you will permit me to keep you from your bed a short time longer. I need to explain why you have that scar. What Voldemort was looking for in the Department of Mysteries, and why I did not tell you sooner.”
“Dobby is ready to go! Would Master Draco please proofread his note, the way Miss Hermione does?”

I have stolen your wand because you are a bad evil wizard.

It is in the kitchen.

Dobby

Draco blinked twice.

“Your spelling is perfect, Dobby. Off you go.”

“Dobby was wrong to call you a bad evil wizard, Draco Malfoy!” Dobby called, and disapparated. Draco snorted. Dobby hadn’t been wrong at all.

#

The Daily Prophet news clipping:

MALFOY TRIAL VERDICT

1 YEAR IN AZKABAN

Lucius Malfoy’s statement to the court was as follows:

“If I had been in the service of You-Know-Who, surely you believe I would have brought a wand? I was visiting the ministry to talk sense into a bunch of school children I thought dangerously misguided, nothing more. I regret that my actions have been misconstrued, and that I trespassed in a secure area in my concern for their wellbeing. I look forward to resuming my activities for the good of wizard-kind after my sentence is complete.”
Professor Umbridge was, more or less, eventually, fine. It turned out one side effects of the paralytic sleeping poison was vivid horrifying dreams. Professor Umbridge’s had apparently involved centaurs.

Harry went by Professor Snape’s office and quarters, but Professor Snape had apparently gone home for the summer.

Harry, who hadn’t even known Professor Snape had a home outside Hogwarts, took a bit of time on a sunny Sunday sitting by the Lake to try to wrap his mind around that one. Did Professor Snape have a wife or children, at his not-Hogwarts home? Did he have a cat? No, maybe a snake… a fish? A murderous garden, like Sirius? Did he live in a city or in the countryside, the south of Wales or someplace nearby in Scotland?

The mind boggled.

“Hello, Harry,” Draco said lightly, sitting down next to him. “A little bird told me you’re not roommates with the Dark Lord any longer.”

“No, seems like not. Turns out people who aren’t a little bit sociopaths need to occlude with emotions, not by shutting their emotions out.”

“Don’t call me a sociopath, Harry.”

“…you’ve been learning occlumency?”

“Yes. Ever since you mentioned it, in fact. You aren’t the only person who can check out a library book.”

Draco sounded very peaceful, even pleased.

“I would have thought you’d be a little cross about your father being in prison,” Harry said cautiously.

“Oh, I hate it. But it could be a great deal worse – his reputation really won’t suffer with any of the public, this way. I can’t speak for his dignity, of course.”

“I don’t really understand.”

“Do you know how Professor Snape is?”

Oh. Harry thought maybe he did understand.

“He’s a little under the weather. He went home. To his house.”

Draco threw a stone into the lake.

“Not sure I ever really pictured him having a house, to be honest,” Draco said.

“I saw him wearing a hat this year,” Harry offered. “It was snowing out.”

They sat in silence for a while, watching the sun shimmer on the water, and contemplated their teacher.
“Draco,” Harry said slowly, “With everything… when was the first time you looked into the future and knew you’d kill someone someday?”

“I – suppose I must have been very small. I don’t really remember. I knew from the time I was too young to ride a broomstick that some people didn’t understand my father and that strong men fought their enemies.”

“How do you wrap your mind around it? Knowing you’re going to have to kill someone specific.”

“I’ve never known I had to kill someone specific. Just… general willingness.”

Harry waited patiently.

“If I figure that one out,” Draco said, grey eyes distant as he threw another stone into the water, hair gleaming white-gold, “I’ll let you know.”

“Draco,” said an abrupt voice. Harry glanced around. Crabbe. He remembered Crabbe’s father being at the Department of Mysteries with Mr. Malfoy.

“Vince,” Draco said lazily. “Want to pull up a stone? We were just talking about our plans to murder each other’s allies.”

Draco, Harry thought, was amazing at telling the truth.

“I’d rather murder him right here.”

Draco stood, putting a hand on Crabbe’s arm.

“Witnesses, Vince. Witnesses. Let’s go practice, instead. I’ll see you soon, Potter.”

Crabbe grunted, but allowed Draco to lead him away.

The sun set as Harry sat, watching the lake and thinking about being a murderer. Sure, he’d realized in a vague way that most of the adult wizards he looked up to were murderers or attempted murderers, but somehow he’d thought he’d be able to skip it. He didn’t know if his parents had been murderers. He hoped not, somehow. Eventually, he went inside.

#

Dear Harry,

I don’t really know where to start, but Remus says I should write you a note even if I’m angry. I’ve gotten most of the story now from Dumbledore. The worst part about all of this is suddenly I know how adults felt about me and James throwing ourselves into reckless stunts at your age. It was funnier when I did it.

That basilisk fang worked just fine to destroy the locket. Mentioned it to Dumbledore and he said it was a good decision, and that he might call upon me to assist him with tracking down more of Voldemort’s cursed items to destroy – can’t hurt to clean up after the man a little.

The Ministry’s been very cooperative about my sentence. I guess the offer of time served is back on the table, but they want to do it properly with an actual trial this time. I didn’t bring them Wormtail, but there were a pile of Death Eaters stunned in their lobby for them, and Remus was quite quick to point out the terms of the old agreement. So I’m in holding, which mostly means I’m partnering with Kingsley for the Order, since he’s my erstwhile jailor. Funny how things turn out. Still can’t visit,
what with being under arrest, but I think it’s progress. Kingsley says hello.

See you at home later this summer. We’ll have a flaming row and then how about hot chocolate?  

Sirius
Bad Days

The train ride home was punctuated by a nice chance to hex Malfoy and Crabbe senseless with the DA – numbers counted – and the chance for Greg to surprise Harry again.

“So, er, Greg,” Harry tried. “What are you doing about the summer holidays?”

“Going home with Luna,” Greg said evenly.

“Oh.”

“Need to ask her father’s permission to court her,” he added.

“…oh.”

“Can’t ask her to marry me until she’s sixteen,” Greg concluded.

The entire carriage stared at him. Except Luna, who continued reading contentedly.

“Aren’t you a little – young?” asked Ron, with a squeak.

“Don’t want her getting away, do I,” said Greg. “Look at your sister. The pretty girls get too much attention.”

“Did you just call my sister pretty,” Ron asked flatly.

“Your brother just called you ugly,” Greg told Ginny helpfully.

Harry was beginning to wonder if disassociation from Malfoy to do his thinking for him had sped Greg’s brain up somehow. He certainly had a knack for causing trouble, as Ron and Ginny descended into an amazing row.

#

Everyone threatening Uncle Vernon for him was a really wonderful moment. It did not make things at the Dursleys any more peaceful, however. His uneasy peace with Aunt Petunia was more uneasy than ever, and Uncle Vernon had decided to firmly pretend he didn’t exist. Only Dudley made any effort to be friendly, going so far as to say he’d decided not to beat Harry up anymore.

“…thanks, Dudley,” Harry said, contemplating how he was supposed to survive however long was magically necessary to live in this house.

“Want to go to the park?” Dudley asked.

“Er. Sure.”

Dudley walked with Harry to the park, where they stood awkwardly.

“Merlin,” Harry said after a minute. “This is too weird. Battle tag? It’s like Harry hunting only I get a turn chasing.”

Dudley eyed him.

“You run faster than me.”
“Then you need more practice, don’t you,” Harry said loftily. “Slowpoke.”

Dudley lunged at him, and Harry fled. It wasn’t quite like having a friend, but it was within the same country.

Harry fell asleep that night in his bare, pale blue room with locks on the doors and all his things hidden away from his uncle, and couldn’t help feeling he was in a particularly depressing hotel.

The news reports were dismal – Voldemort seemed to be taking his newly revealed status as an opportunity to go on a rampage. Harry wasn’t quite sure what the magical equivalent of a hurricane was, but he could tell magical assassinations when he heard ‘locked room mystery.’

#

“I’m going to the shops this afternoon, Dudders,” Aunt Petunia cooed to her son. “Will you be going out with your little friends?”

“Yes, mum,” Dudley said patiently. “I’m taking Harry along. Toughen him up, you know.”

Aunt Petunia shot Harry a look of pure dislike, but only said, “Only if he’s not bothering you, dear.”

“He’s fine,” Dudley said absently.

Dudley’s friends were not Harry’s friends, but a brisk round of negotiation had turned Harry hunting into a sort of muggle cross with Quidditch, with a few balls and permission to throw them at each other’s heads. Dudley said nothing when Harry applied liquid bandages to particularly gruesome injuries, and Harry said nothing either. Plausible deniability was, after all, important. And there was something really soothing at chuckling a solid piece of wood right at Piers’ face.

Dudley and Harry trailed back to their house as the sun began to head towards dinnertime, tired and covered in grass stains, Harry nursing a black eye.

Uncle Vernon met them at the door, Aunt Petunia at his shoulder, an evil glint in his eye.

“Got a letter from your lot, boy,” Uncle Vernon said, waving a piece of parchment. “Came by owl for the head of the household. Congratulated me on you getting your apprenticeship and being an adult now. All about how now you have a master my responsibilities with you are over. Over. Didn’t think you’d mention it, did you? Eat me out of house and home once you’d gone and done some – thing – with your lot so someone else has to take responsibility for you? Well, I’ve had it! Being threatened, bloody owls – I’m done! Get out, boy. Out of my house, out of my life, out!”

“Aunt Petunia,” Harry said, looking to his aunt to tell his uncle that he couldn’t do this, because of the wards, because Dumbledore said. To say that Vernon was frightening the neighbors. “There’s been a mistake. My apprenticeship doesn’t mean anything like that.”

“So you do have one,” Vernon growled. “Aha!”

Dudley sighed, and grabbed Harry’s arm.

“Come on. Let’s go to the shops, he’ll have calmed down by the time we’re back.”

“Aunt Petunia,” Harry said again. His aunt looked back at him, eyes blank.

“I don’t know why we didn’t do this years ago,” she said matter-of-factly. “It’s so obvious.”

Harry stared. Dudley started dragging him down the street.
“They’re just in a strop about something,” Dudley told him. “Give ‘em ten minutes and they’ll forget it. It’s what I always do.”

“They treat me a little differently than they treat you,” Harry said doubtfully, but he couldn’t figure out how to break Dudley’s hold on his arm, so he allowed himself to be dragged.

Dudley bought them a giant chocolate bar to share, and offered Harry about an eighth of it. Harry laughed a little.

“You’re getting generous in your old age, Dudders.”

Harry nimbly ducked a swat of a huge hand.

“Dudley,” his cousin said firmly. “And I figure you saved my life a little, last summer. So.”

Harry couldn’t argue with that one, as they ambled home in the summer darkness, lit only by fireflies.

By fireflies, and the soaring green skull, snake trailing from its mouth, hanging like smoke above Privet Drive.
Harry had a soaring moment of vertigo, and then his brain kicked into gear. This was an obvious, obvious trap, again predicated on Harry’s saving people thing, but Harry had learned something this June and – and he had Dudley to keep alive. How could he keep Dudley alive?

Wand out, boy.

Obeying the voice of his teacher in his mind, Harry drew his wand, grabbing Dudley’s large arm with his other hand.

“Dudley,” Harry said softly. “We need to run, now. That’s a sign of a wizard terrorist group. We don’t have a chance if we go that way. Come on. Walk with me.”

“But mum and dad-“

“They’re dead. You’re not. You want to live?”

Harry couldn’t believe the words coming out of his mouth, he was half sure he was lying. Aunt Petunia couldn’t be dead, Uncle Vernon couldn’t be dead, but he remembered from last summer that explanation of morsmorde.

"Ron, You-Know-Who and his followers sent the Dark Mark into the air whenever they killed," said Mr. Weasley. "The terror it inspired...you have no idea, you're too young. Just picture coming home and finding the Dark Mark hovering over your house, and knowing what you're about to find inside...." Mr. Weasley winced. "Everyone's worst fear...the very worst..."

Dudley seemed frozen, so Harry gestured sharply with his wand.

“Walk, Dudley.”

And, held at wandpoint, his cousin did turn and start walking back the way they had come.

What did Harry need to do next. He wanted to shout and scream and run blindly into a fight with Voldemort and his Death Eaters. He wanted-

Harry dug into one of the pockets of his hoodie and pulled out a small mirror.

“Sirius.”

“Harry, can this wait?” came Sirius’ voice. “The Prime Minister’s about to give an address, I shouldn’t really be talking.”

“There’s a Dark Mark over my house. I’ve got Dudley, but I don’t see anyone else.”

“I think it was Remus and Tonks on your detail tonight,” Sirius said. “I’m on my way.”

“It’s a trap,” Harry hissed. “Don’t. They probably want to get at the Prime Minister while you’re distracted, for Merlin’s sake.”

Sirius hissed out a quiet breath.

“I’ll contact the Order,” said the voice from Harry’s mirror, “You just need to hold on until Remus finds you. Make sure it’s him, mind. We’re not the only ones with access to Polyjuice.”
Polyjuice, Harry realized with a jolt, was a great idea. It would be great for them to not look like Harry Potter and Dudley Dursley right now.

Well, there was always invisibility chews. Now seemed like a day where you worried about temporary blindness side effects later.

Dudley had started gibbering.

“Gotta go,” Harry told his mirror, and stowed it away again to grab Dudley before Dudley could bolt into the night. Dudley raised a fist. Harry raised his wand.

“Dudley,” Harry said, “I’m going to give you something to drink to make you look like someone else. Okay? And then chocolate.”

“I’m not drinking anything you gave me-“

“I didn’t say you had a choice.”

And Dudley drank the polyjuice potion Harry hastily prepared in the shadow of a hedge, and Harry tried not to find Dudley Dursley turning into a copy of Draco Malfoy entirely weird. His posture, clothes, and expression were entirely different, miserable and hunched. That’d have to do.

“C’mon, um, Dennis.”

Harry handed calming chocolate over to Dudley, who ate them absently the way he ate anything handed to him, and Harry ate an invisibility chew. What he wouldn’t give for having the Trace off his wand already….

“Why aren’t we running?” Dudley asked calmly.

“Because running draws attention,” Harry muttered. “And I don’t know how many Death Eaters there are – shh.”

They walked, slowly and calmly, past a weasely looking man leaning on a lamppost who reminded Harry dreadfully of his classmate Nott. The chill fog that had drifted into town over the week since Harry had been home was settling in fiercely now, and it drank the warmth from Harry’s bones. They never had had dinner.

They turned the next corner, back towards the center of town. Harry was trying to figure out if he should call the Knight Bus, or if that was too obvious. He could summon his Firebolt, but that seemed obvious too.

Harry heard someone sniff, and then two people fell into step with him and Dudley, as if stepping out of thin air.

“Wotcha, Harry,” said Tonks. She didn’t look like Tonks. Never had Harry been so glad to see two hobos. Remus still looked like himself, but he honestly looked like a hobo most of the time. “Okay?”

“Not – not really. I thought I shouldn’t go back to the house? There was a Ministry pamphlet.”

“No – not really. I thought I shouldn’t go back to the house? There was a Ministry pamphlet.”

“First time a Ministry pamphlet’ll be good for something,” Tonks said. “We’ll side-along you out of here, then I’ll come back with a team to clear the house. I’m sorry.”

“How do I know you’re really you?”

“Last year, I helped sneak you out to fight boggarts and doxies with Sirius for your Easter Break,
and I told you it was kidnapping,” said Remus. “I’m afraid you’re going to have to take my word for it about Tonks.”

“…okay. What’s side-along?”

“Apparition with a passenger,” said Remus. “That’s you.”

“What about Dudley?”

“He’s a muggle, Harry,” Remus said softly. “We’ll be able to hide him later, but we can’t take him with us.”

“He’s not a – he’s coming with me.” Harry searched for a reason for that to be okay. “He’s a Squib. Wizard family, right? That’s legal.”

Remus and Tonks exchanged glances.

“Works for me,” said Tonks. “I think they’ll buy it this week. C’mon, boys.”

Each adult took the hand of one teenager, and they disappeared with a bang from Little Whinging.
Once the calming chocolate wore off, Dudley threw the biggest tantrum Harry had ever seen. Harry, who felt like throwing a tantrum himself, locked himself in his room and refused to come out. He didn’t want to deal with Dudley right now. He couldn’t face Dudley right now.

A knock came on his door.

“Harry,” said Sirius. “Dumbledore needs to talk to you downstairs. I can tell him to shove it if you need me to.”

Harry thought about anyone daring to tell Dumbledore to shove it, and unbolted his door.

Sirius’ expression was grave, but his eyes were alive somehow in a way Harry didn’t recognize.

“Come on,” Sirius said, and led the way downstairs. Professor Dumbledore, Dudley, and a man Harry vaguely recognized wearing the most purple outfit Harry had ever seen were all sitting around the kitchen table.

“I have just been explaining to your cousin, Harry,” Dumbledore said solemnly, as Harry took his seat, “That if he likes, he may go away and never see you again. The name Dudley Dursley is a dangerous name to have, but we can arrange a different name, far away. He would, of course, be entirely alone, surrounded by strangers who felt no need to protect him.”

“I want to stay with Harry,” Dudley blurted.

Harry felt very much like a character in a play, and eyed Dumbledore through narrowed eyes.

“Harry?” Dudley asked, and Harry could see that Dudley was about two seconds from another fullblown tantrum or perhaps crying.

“Of course we should stick together,” Harry managed, trying to sound sturdy. “We’re family.”

“I should be very happy, for the summer, to have you live here with me,” said Sirius. “I’m Harry’s godfather.”

“Harry said you were a murderer,” Dudley blurted.

“I was cleared of all charges,” Sirius said soothingly, but Harry knew Dudley a little better than that.

“He got away with it,” Harry clarified quickly, before Dudley could open his mouth. “And he stole a hippogriff this one time.”

“What’s a hippogriff?”

“It’s a flying horse thing.”

Dudley frowned in apparent deep thought.

“Or there’s Aunt Marge,” Harry observed dryly, because he could read his part in a play when people put it in big flashing letters in front of him.

And that was how Dudley Dursley moved in with Harry for the summer, sending Kreacher into hysteric and Sirius’ mum’s portrait into an earsplitting diatribe.
Dudley, sensibly, fled upstairs.

Dumbledore had to leave – there was Voldemort still out there, after all, but he promised to see Harry next week.

“We’ll be fine here,” said Sirius.

After leave-taking was over, Sirius and Harry studied the screaming portrait in mutual disgust.

“Say,” Harry said slowly. “Is this a load-bearing wall?”

“No idea. What’s that?”

Harry explained. Sirius grinned.

“You’ve had a nasty couple weeks,” Sirius said lightly. “You can do the honors, if you like.”

“The trace-“

“Use mine,” Sirius said, and handed over a wand of dark gnarled wood. “Try _bombarda._”

Harry blew holes in the wall until the fact that the portrait was stuck to the wall became something of a moot issue, because the wall wasn’t attached to anything important like, say, the rest of the building.

Sirius grinned toothily and said, “Library next?”

“We should give the portrait and tapestry to Kreacher to look after,” Harry commented as he headed for the stairs. “Wall and all.”

Sirius grunted.

“You have to admit he’s been easier to live with lately,” Harry said, giving Sirius his wand back so Sirius could move the library books away from the offending tapestry-covered wall they were about to destroy.

It was very therapeutic. Dudley, who seemed to think that bloodthirsty maniacs were just the people to hide behind when being hunted by bloodthirsty maniacs, bothered Sirius for war stories over dinner.

Harry threw in a few stories of fighting monsters, since it seemed to calm Dudley down a little. It wasn’t _normal_, but… it wasn’t bad.

Sirius point blank refused to show Harry the papers in the morning before he left for his job, which was currently posing as a muggle bodyguard for the Prime Minister while his minder, Kingsley, pretended to be a secretary.

“We’ll have an Order meeting just as soon as we can, and I think someone will be bringing your things over later. For now, just… try to keep busy.”

Sirius flew from the room, and Harry eyed Dudley doubtfully. Dudley, who was being very damp, ate another bite of eggs.

Harry did not know what to say.

“Bacon?” he offered.
Dudley nodded.

Harry made another half pound of bacon. Dudley ate the bacon. Harry had another cup of tea, and contemplated the problem of Dudley, who liked games, but not games where you had to be clever. Dudley, who liked things like electricity.

How did adults deal with difficult conversations, anyway. Merlin.

“I think Sirius keeps firewhiskey around here somewhere,” Harry said. “Ever been drunk?”

“…no.”

“Seems like a good day to have a try, don’t you think?”

Which is how Harry and Dudley ended up locking themselves in a quarter-demolished library, seeing what drinking firewhiskey was like. Harry was honestly not that impressed, but he could hear people coming and going downstairs and the idea of talking to members of the Order and them offering him comfort was just… he just wasn’t doing it.

“I didn’t want them to be murdered,” Harry said aloud as he thought it.

“Yeah, you did,” Dudley muttered. “You made the – the magic protection stop. It’s your fault.”

“I didn’t kill them. I didn’t kill them! I DIDN’T WANT THEM TO DIE.”

“THEY WEREN’T YOUR PARENTS, WERE THEY? They were mine. They were mine.”

“They were the only aunt and uncle I had!”

“It’s not as if you lost your parents!”

Harry took a breath, and let it out.

“It’s exactly like I lost my parents, Dudley,” he said tiredly. “It was probably the same man, back for round two. He probably sent that letter to Uncle Vernon to trick him into kicking me out. It’d be like him.”

“Are we going to die?”

“You’re not,” Harry said, more firmly. “You’re going to live and have horrible fat children who bully all the other kids and – and make drills or something. I might die, I don’t know.”


“If we pretend you’re a Squib, you could live in the wizarding world.”

“Why would I want to? You all use fire for everything. It’s stupid.”

“We use magic for everything. It’s great.”

“Except for all the terrorists, you mean.”

“Yeah. Except for all the terrorists.”

“So why you? What’d you do to him, this terrorist?”

“…dunno. He keeps trying to kill me and I keep not dying, I suppose. Has to be bad for the ego. I’m
just a kid and everything.”

Dudley contemplated him through lidded eyes.

“Yeah, I can see why someone’d want to kill you, actually. You’re… dunno the word.”

“Annoying?”

“Not that one.”

“Slippery?”

“Well, yeah, but that’s not it either.”

“I don’t know, Dudley. Let me know if you figure it out.”

“That! Right there. You can’t beat me in a fight, so you’re always… saying things.”

“I can beat you in a fight now,” Harry pointed out, wondering if more whiskey would help this conversation. He patted a broken piece of wall affectionately. “You mean I’m sarcastic.”

“I guess.”

Harry sighed.

“Tell me about all these adults,” Dudley said. “I don’t know one from another, except the old guy runs your school.”

Harry winced at referring to Dumbledore as ‘the old guy’ and tried to explain to Dudley who everyone was, without adding anything secret, personal, or none of Dudley’s business. It was hard to talk about Remus without talking about werewolves, Dumbledore without talking about the Order. Still, it passed the time.
Custody Issues

Sirius protecting the Prime Minister was rather good, besides being pretty cool. It meant that Sirius wasn’t around much, which suited Harry – Harry was feeling far too many things to be able to deal with a witness.

It also meant he and Sirius hadn’t gotten around to that row they’d been planning to have, but Harry figured they’d planned to have that in July anyway. It’d keep, he hoped.

Not that being alone at Number 12 with Dudley and Kreacher while trying to deal with a whole lot of guilt was exactly easy – Harry found himself shouting at Kreacher quite without meaning to, after Kreacher started treating Dudley like a stray dog they’d adopted that liked to steal food.

Admittedly, Dudley did steal food a lot, but that didn’t mean Kreacher should use that tone with him when his parents had just been murdered. Luckily for Harry’s sanity, someone else had felt free to explain Voldemort to Dudley, so Harry didn’t have to stumble through why this had happened. ‘Nutter who kills a lot of people’ did cover it, especially once the Bridge attack happened.

At least Tonks brought Harry's things from home.

#

The interesting thing about breaking both part of the front hallway and part of the library wall was that suddenly conversations in the kitchen were a lot less soundproof, if you put your head in the hole in the library wall and held very still.

So far, Harry hadn’t been caught doing it. He was feeling pretty good about that.

“Harry should be here,” Sirius was saying. “It’s his life.”

“He doesn’t need the worry,” said another male voice.

Something something, “If you think you can win a Ministry hearing for custody, you have another thing coming, Black.”

That was Professor Snape. Harry was suddenly glad he wasn’t in the meeting, even if it was about him – he didn’t want to face someone else he had to feel guilty about today.

“…difference between legal custody and who is to care for him….” That was Dumbledore.

“Arthur and I….” Mrs. Weasley.

Harry decided this discussion was too depressing, and pulled his head out of the hole in the library wall. He turned, and stared right into Kreacher’s face.

This was not a face anyone wanted to be surprised by, to put it mildly.

“Kreacher could have been serving Miss Bella, but no. Kreacher has to serve the master, and the master has his pets and his horrible boy. What is the horrible boy doing, Kreacher wonders? Is he going to destroy more of the house?”

“No, I’m not going to destroy more of the house. Anyway, we put the painting and tapestry away for… whoever.” Harry paused, diverted. “What happens if Sirius doesn’t get married?”
Kreacher moaned at him.

“...what happens if Sirius does get married,” Harry muttered. “I can’t see Sirius staying home. Do wizards take jobs as babysitters?”

“Kreacher would teach the child all the history of the House of Black,” Kreacher said, an odd light in his eyes. “A rebirth. With a proper woman.”

“...you want me to research genealogies for you, don’t you.”

“Kreacher does not need the horrible boy to do his research for him.”

“There’ve been a lot of deaths in the last war,” Harry said, enjoying the distraction. “And you’d want to be picky, right? Someone who could hold Sirius’ interest but had the right, um, pedigree.”

“The horrible boy will help Kreacher.”

“And then Kreacher will stop calling Dudley my pet?”

“No. But Kreacher will repair the wall.”

“Yeah. Yeah, alright.”

Which is how Harry ended up researching pureblood genealogies for the next few hours, while downstairs people debated his life. Sirius came in to find Harry sitting cross-legged on the floor, Kreacher staring at him from a foot away.

“...Harry?”

“We’ve gotten it narrowed down to about twenty girls,” Harry said happily. “Except these books haven’t been updated in the past decade, so they might be dead or married. You don’t mind if I pick who you marry, right? Since you’re all picking who I live with.”

Sirius snorted.

“Stop getting Kreacher’s hopes up and come downstairs. I think you can appear without starting any duels now.”

“Do you promise?”

“Absolutely not. Molly Weasley’s going to come at me with a knife.”

“Better be ready to duck, then.”

“You think she’d go for the face? I was thinking the gut, myself.”

“Honestly, she seems more like a frying pan lady, if we’re leaving wands out of the picture.”

“Wands and frying pan, enchant the frying pan to hit me in the head,” guessed Sirius.

Harry took his seat at the kitchen table. Still there were Molly Weasley, Sirius, and the man in purple – Diggle?

“Before we say anything,” Sirius said, the light of mischief of his eye, “Harry, why don’t you tell us what you’d like to have happen with your guardianship.”
“You’re my guardian,” Harry said promptly. “I think Dudley and I are going to last about another week before we start breaking furniture.”

Daedelus Diggle coughed something that sounded surprisingly like ‘walls.’ Harry hadn’t been aware the man had a sense of humor.

“No one wants you two trapped here all summer,” said Sirius. “Especially with me away all the time with the Prime Minister. So while this will be your home of record, if the Ministry asks, Molly’s inviting you to stay with Ron as usual.”

“And Dudley?”

“If he agrees,” says Mr. Diggle, “We’ll create an identity for him. Daedelus Diggle the Second sounds promising, doesn’t it? I live in a Muggle town. He’ll have some time to settle in before the school year begins, and you can see him again next summer as usual.”

Harry, who hadn’t been expecting that, took a moment to sit and think about it.

“Will that… work?”

“Dumbledore says it will,” said Sirius.

“He said it’d work before, too,” Harry muttered.

“Harry, dear….” Said Mrs. Weasley. “There’s something you should see.”

She handed over a folded sheet of parchment, covered in emerald ink, that Harry had last seen held in Vernon Dursley’s large fist. The lettering was elegant, angled, somehow old fashioned, and the letter read like Ministry boilerplate. At least until Harry got to the signature, large, jagged, and emerald.

_Yours most sincerely,_

_T. M. Riddle_

Most people wouldn’t know what that meant, but Harry wasn’t most people. Harry went back to the head of the letter and began again. _Head of household… you and your wife are to be congratulated… your efforts in his upbringing have been noted…._

“Oh,” said Harry, and then he didn’t say anything else for a while. He wondered if Voldemort had laughed, this time, when he did it.

It was around this time when the temporary blindness kicked in. Harry, who had been hoping he’d managed a batch _without_ this side effect, blinked a few times.

“Harry?” asked Sirius.

“Gone a bit blind. Don’t worry, it’ll wear off.”

“Have you been experimenting again?” Mrs. Weasley started rather severely.

“I thought it might be good to be invisible what with Voldemort attacking my house!”

Harry was yelling. He’d never yelled at Mrs. Weasley before. He dragged a hand down his face, and tried to think about Quidditch.
“You did good, kid,” said Sirius.

“I didn’t even try to save them,” Harry muttered, looking down. Not being able to see was awful.

“But you saved you, and that’s who I care about. I could care less about them.”

“Sirius-“ interjected Mrs. Weasley.

“It’s true, isn’t it?” asked Sirius. “They were both nasty pieces of work. I’ve been tempted to curse them myself, and not just once either.”

“You can’t say that.”

“Sirius is right,” Harry said. “I know you want to think the best of people, Mrs. Weasley. And I didn’t want them to be murdered. But they were….“

He shrugged.

“Perhaps we should resume this meeting when Mr. Potter can see again?” asked Mr. Diggle.

And that seemed to be that, for a while, thankfully.
Dudley Realizes There Are Advantages

By the time Harry was done being blind, Daedelus Diggle had talked to Dudley for a few hours, Mrs. Weasley had given Harry a huge hug and a stack of meat pies, and Sirius had gone back to work. Harry spent the time chatting idly with Kreacher about whether Sirius was more likely to be interested in a pureblood girl his own age or someone closer to Harry’s age, which devolved into a really disturbing segue into why Sirius’ womanizing great-grandfather had been a great man.

Harry had begun to see vague shapes by the time Dudley came to sit by him in the library.

“You never said you were famous.”

“Well… would’ve been a bit awkward, wouldn’t it.”

“Suppose.”

“What did you and Mr. Diggle talk about?”

“The town he lives in. It’s tiny – no other wizards he knows of, and it’ll be dead boring, but at least he has a telly.”

Harry laughed softly.

“Think you’ll go?”

“Do you think I should?”

“I think we should stick together,” Harry said thoughtfully. “But… standing right next to me probably isn’t the safest place to be. We can be family and not live right in each other’s pockets all the time. You think you’ll be able to talk him into getting you a playstation?”

“Seems like a soft touch,” Dudley said, completely without shame. “Bet I can talk him ‘round to whatever I want. Poor ol’ orphan me, needs to be taken care of.”

It was a good thing, Harry reflected, that Dudley had always had the emotional depth of a mud puddle.

“You can stay here, if you want.”

“Everyone’s been really clear about that,” Dudley said, with some puzzlement. Harry decided not to elaborate on magic tied into Dudley’s blood, on the theory that it would make Dudley scared of his own veins. Best not.

“Did he say when you’d move?”

“Next week,” Dudley said, giving up on the pretense that he was asking Harry’s opinion one bit. “It gives him time to make paperwork somehow. He says his friend knows all the ‘muggle’ criminals who do that sort of thing.”

Harry squinted at Dudley’s grey, blobby form.

“Tell me you didn’t say you’d like to meet Mundungus Fletcher.”

“He sounds like the sort of bloke to know.”
“Half the people who come through here are police, Dudley.”

“Not nicking anything important here, am I?”

Harry had a brief hysterical mental image of Dudley Dursley, cat burglar, breaking into museums on a thin line in a black form-fitting suit.

He really did have to invent candy to erase memories.

“Harry,” Dudley said thoughtfully.

“Yeah?”

There was a blur of motion, and suddenly the grey, blurry world was even blurrier.

“Got your glasses,” Dudley sing-songed.

Poor little orphan, hah.

“Dudley.”

“Have fun!” And Dudley bolted to the other side of the room.

The ensuing chase scene was embarrassing. Mostly for Harry. He was so glad a responsible adult had realized that locking him and Dudley in a house together for three months was less a recipe for brotherly bonding and more a recipe for… this.

#

The thing about being almost friends, sort of, with Dudley, if only because the other option was being almost enemies, was that Harry was reminded that his cousin was basically a better person than Draco Malfoy, who Harry secretly rather liked in between wanting to punch him. Dudley didn’t want to kill off any large groups of people, or keep intelligent beings as overlooked slaves-if-you-listened-to-Hermione-which-everyone-should. (It would be a better world if everyone listened to Hermione.) He was just selfish, lazy, and casually cruel, with an eye for petty crime that made Harry vow to keep him away from Mundungus Fletcher if it was the last thing he did.

Harry would see him at Christmas – Harry was not entirely sure whose bright idea that was – and since being in the same room with Dudley left Harry with the overwhelming urge to apologize for getting Dudley’s parents killed and also the overwhelming urge to yell at Dudley for being sad, Harry was fine with that. Really fine.

Harry was fine in general. If he spent some time hiding in his wardrobe, trying to figure out why he was crying over Aunt Petunia of all people, well, that was no one’s business but his own.
VI: Hedwig is a Great Owl

Harry did a little mental math when he found out that Dumbledore was taking him to the Weasley’s. Did that mean one Dumbledore equaled six fully trained aurors? It did sound about right, but it made Harry wonder where he could learn to be that fierce. Potions was wonderful, but it was mostly a support profession – good if you prepared for the right thing or to clean up after a disaster, but in the split-second decision-making of combat he’d noticed there just wasn’t time to be finding and drinking the right potion or eating the right candy. At least he hadn’t slacked off on learning Defense to work on his potions grade.

#

"I have played my part well," said Snape. "And you overlook Dumbledore’s greatest weakness: he has to believe the best of people. I spun him a tale of deepest remorse when I joined his staff, fresh from my Death Eater days, and he embraced me with open arms–though, as I say, never allowing me nearer the Dark Arts than he could help. Dumbledore has been a great wizard--oh yes, he has," (for Bellatrix had made a scathing noise), "the Dark Lord acknowledges it. I am pleased to say, however, that Dumbledore is growing old. The duel with the Dark Lord last month shook him. He has since sustained a serious injury because his reactions are slower than they once were. But through all these years, he has never stopped trusting Severus Snape, and therein lies my great value to the Dark Lord."

Snape took another sip of wine, and wondered if he’d have to kill a woman he rather liked tonight.

“But surely nothing, nothing, can explain why you would take Harry Potter as an apprentice?” Bellatrix said triumphantly.

“It is certainly not my intention to explain it. In truth, I do not understand it myself.” He smiled, allowing himself the pleasure of confounding someone. “But when the Dark Lord makes a suggestion, one listens.”

“The Dark Lord told you to make Potter your apprentice?”

“Perhaps you will have better luck requesting an explanation than I had,” he said dryly. “I have my suspicions, but I do not make a habit of speculating on his motives.”

Bellatrix still looked unhappy, though she appeared unsure how best to attack Snape next. Taking advantage of her silence, Snape turned to her sister.

#

It turned out that having your Chosen One’s aunt and uncle murdered was bad for morale, so the deaths of Vernon and Petunia Dursley of Number Four, Privet Drive were attributed to a gas leak. Wizards, who seldom read the Muggle papers, continued on in the blithe assumption that the Chosen One was off training in a cheerful but action-filled montage.

Harry Potter had pus in his hair. This marked the third time today he had gotten an exploding potion in the face, though it was the first time it had been of the consistency of slime. The last two had just stunk. Researching murderers was so much less messy than researching potions (at least when you weren’t in the same room with the murderers).

“Kreacher,” Harry called. “Do me a favor and get me a clean cloth, would you?”
Kreacher handed him a clean cloth with a glare that could have stripped paint. Since Harry was a lot more worried about accidentally stripping his own skin off, Harry blithely ignored this.

“I’m going away today, Kreacher,” Harry said, taking off his glasses and trying to remove the most obvious goo from his face and hair. “You’ll have to take care of Sirius for me.”

“Kreacher could have belonged to Miss Bellatrix, but no, Kreacher must deal with the master, who is a disgrace.”

“You know he’s more likely to act disgraceful just to be contrary, don’t you? I… always used to do that. He’s quite proper when he’s not thinking about it.”

Kreacher did not have an immediate retort to this. Harry futile attempted to clean his glasses on the already sodden green hand towel.

“Right,” Harry said. “A bath, I think.”

“Kreacher will draw it,” Kreacher said abruptly, and disappeared with a pop.

Harry continued unsure if Kreacher wanted to kill him or wanted Harry to stay forever, but Harry was pretty used to a bit of existential uncertainty in his life at this point. Number 12 Grimmauld Place might not have a pervading aura of evil anymore, or weird things scuttling in the corners, but it could never be a muggle home with Kreacher wandering around in a tea towel muttering.

Harry had a secret plan to get Kreacher a new tea towel for Christmas with reindeer on it. It wouldn’t suit Kreacher at all, but Harry was hoping Kreacher shared Dobby’s complete lack of sense of what clothes should look like.

If Harry hurried, he should be clean and presentable by the time Dumbledore got here to take him on that errand.

#

Harry had to fight the strongest urge to steal Horace Slughorn’s dragon’s blood during their conversation. It was not that he made a habit of being a thief (indeed, he’d gone quite off it), but some of the most interesting potions needed it as an ingredient and he was quite limited by his wish not to drain his savings to practice making terrible excuses for potions.

#

Harry had to talk to Professor Dumbledore about the Dursleys – Professor Dumbledore had to apologize, for one thing – but he successfully avoided discussing them with Ron and Hermione. All his previous experience avoiding talking about the Dursleys came in handy, really.

With a paranoid glance at his trunk, Harry decided to avoid unpacking. This whole thing about home and family was enough to give a kid a complex, honestly.

Fleur Delacour was a surprise. Telling his friends about the prophecy wasn’t a surprise, really – Harry knew they’d be alright with it. It was mostly a good distraction from any impulse anyone might have had to sympathize with him.

And then there were owls, bearing OWL results.

#
Dear Professor Snape,

I know you do not like to be bothered during the summer holidays, but I thought I would

Harry crumpled up the note and started over.

Dear Professor Snape,

I achieved an Outstanding on my Potions OWL, as instructed. I hope your summer is

Harry tore that one in half. Hedwig, sitting on her perch, hooted at him.

“I’m working on a letter for Professor Snape, Hedwig. I’ll have it for you in a minute.”

Dear Professor Snape,

How are you? I am fine. I hope you are recovered. I was pleased to receive my OWL results and
look forward to seeing you at Hogwarts

Harry studied that one, then crumpled it up too. Hedwig, bored, soared out the window.

Dear Evil Nose,

I got an Outstanding on my potions OWL, so you’re stuck with me. Everyone has been asking me
how I am, and I look forward to returning to school so you can tell me I’m being an idiot. I’ve been
trying to figure out what to put in a letter to you for an hour and this is sadly my best attempt, which
I am now going to ritually burn.

My last myrtle potion demonstrated that if you’re overenthusiastic about the tapping it explodes
amusingly on the unwitting student.

Harry

Harry crumpled it into a ball and threw it out the window, where Hedwig caught it and flew away.

Harry made a noise approximately like ‘gnk.’
Draco Isn't Diplomatic

Dear Mr. Potter,

I expect a draft of your monograph no later than Friday. I am afraid I spilled wine on your letter. I assume it was nothing of dire import.

Cordially,

Severus Snape, Professor, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Well, that was a much nicer reply than Harry had been expecting. Except – a draft of his entire monograph? By Friday?

Professor Snape, Harry thought with considerable cheer, seemed to be feeling fine.

#

Sirius turned up looking windswept and Muggle for Harry’s 16th birthday party, in battered jeans and a leather jacket. He greeted Remus with a bruising hug, and ruffled Harry’s hair.

“Dragonhide, Harry,” he explained in an aside. “Not quite as good as troll hide for blocking spells, but looks a great deal like muggle leather, so just the thing for going around in public.”

A good deal of the discussion turned to muggle fashion, after they’d finished the inevitable war talk, which Sirius wanted to know all about.

“Prime minister’s quite paranoid about the whole thing,” he explained, taking a big bite of Harry’s birthday cake. “With good reason, it seems to me, but it means I don’t have much time to keep up with the news on our side of things. Glad Kingsley could cover for me tonight.”

“You don’t look very much like a bodyguard,” Hermione said doubtfully.

“Well, I’m a bodyguard going incognito, aren’t I?” Sirius said. “Here, this helps.”

Sirius put on a large pair of sunglasses, which made him look like nothing so much as a rock star. One of the older ones who’d taken a few too many drugs and had gotten out of rehab and was doing quite well now, thank you for asking.

Arthur Weasley, naturally, wanted to know the purpose of sunglasses. Almost inevitably, this led to Hermione attempting to explain UV light.

Harry had another slice of cake, and mostly listened.

#

Between his monograph, his friends, trying to figure out how he was going to talk Professor Snape into letting him be Quidditch Captain, and poking through Fred and George’s more interesting stashes of things, time in the Burrow sped by, until it was time to visit Diagon Alley. Hagrid was a welcome sight, but leaving him behind outside Madame Malkin’s was a relief.

So Harry, Ron, and Hermione entered the little shop together. It appeared, at first glance, to be empty, but no sooner had the door swung shut behind them than they heard a familiar voice issuing from behind a rack of dress robes in spangled green and blue.
“Mother, surely you don’t think a shopkeeper is a threat to me. Though I am certain you are exquisitely dangerous, Madame Malkin. Ouch – especially with a pin, I see.”

Draco Malfoy, wearing a handsome set of dark green robes, came around the rack of dress robes to examine himself in a mirror. He met Harry’s eye in the mirror, then turned to survey them.

“Perhaps I could go shopping with my delightful little school friends,” he said, very dryly. “Granger, who let you out in public?”

Ron’s wand was in his hand. Harry’s was out, too, and he wasn’t quite sure why.

“Harry, Ron, don’t,” said Hermione. “Not here.”

“No wands in my shop, please,” Madame Malkin said, trying to sound fierce and mostly sounding nervous. Harry eyed her.

“If you’d prefer to be expelled, I suppose I can put up with dodging a few spells as a charity,” Draco said, looking very bored. Harry didn’t buy it for a minute. “After all, sixth year classes actually require some modicum of intelligence, and you’ve all been hit in the head one too many times, haven’t you.”

Ron still hadn’t put away his wand. Harry didn’t either, out of support and healthy paranoia.

_Narcissa Malfoy strolled out from behind the clothes rack._

"Put those away," she said coldly to Harry and Ron. "If you attack my son again, I shall ensure that it is the last thing you ever do."

“I don’t believe you’ve had the pleasure of meeting my mother, have you?” Draco said. “Mother, Harry Potter, Ronald Weasley, and, oh yes, the girl.”

“We met your sister last month,” Harry found himself saying. “Can’t say we got on.”

Narcissa Malfoy looked at him coolly.

“My sister is not known for ‘getting on’ with anyone.”

“Except Voldemort,” Harry said, and felt a little guilty when the shopkeeper turned a shade of pale green.

“Potter, what _has_ gotten your tail in a twist? I’m busy today,” said Draco. “And you don’t usually terrify the help.”

Harry thought it entirely possible Madame Malkin did not enjoy being called the help, but he refrained from pointing this out.

“My uncle and aunt were murdered,” Harry said shortly. “Put a bit of a damper on my summer, if I’m being honest.”

“Do you know who did it?”

“Who do you _think_, Malfoy.”

Draco’s expression warmed into the first genuine pleasure Harry had seen on his face all day.

“Your disgusting muggles, dead?” His smile broadened. “I hope you’re going to write a proper thank
Ron rushed to Harry’s defense, while Harry was still trying to think past the ringing in his ears, and Draco and his mother ended up leaving. Harry was trying very hard not to think about it.

Dropping by Fred and George’s, seeing his candies taking up a discrete shelf near their self-defense things – that made everything stop buzzing quite so much. Harry added instant darkness powder and instant distractions to his already absurd cloak pockets of Things That Might Be Useful.

One day, he’d figure out how to cut down on those. It’s not like he could really sort through them without use of summoning charms, right now.

#

Draco Malfoy was threatening people with werewolves and buying dark objects. That was, if expected, not ideal.

Harry would have to have a talk with him.

#

“Say, Hermione,” Harry said as summer vacation drew to a close, “Where would I start on learning a few basic ancient runes?”

“With the beginner’s textbook, of course, but why?”

“Professor Snape and I are working on incorporating runic magic into potionmaking, a bit. It’s all very hush-hush.”

Harry escaped the ensuing discussion after only twenty minutes, one second-hand copy of a basic ancient runes textbook richer.
Figuring out Draco had become something of a group hobby, but they were all equally stumped by his new interest in Dark objects.

At least until Harry figured out that Draco had taken the Dark Mark, and silence settled over the three of them like a cloud.

“Well, I suppose that’s it, then,” said Ron. “No more second or third or fourth chances to not be a prat. No more thinking he’s just pretending.”

“Maybe he’s just—”

“You don’t pretend to take the Dark Mark,” said Ron. “It’s not a—a game.”

“We’re sort of his friends,” Harry said. “Let me finish—so I reckon it’s our job to knock him down until he realizes he won’t be standing up until he stops this. I don’t see why we should give him a choice.”

“You can’t make someone be good,” Hermione said, rather gently.

“I’m not sort of his friend,” muttered Ron. “I don’t trust him as far as I can throw him. It’s creepy the way he’s always turning up all over the place like a ghost.”

Harry ran his hands through his hair.

“Would you rather wait to deal with him until he’s learned how to transfigure us all into teaspoons and taught us to dance a jig?”

“We’ll talk about it later,” suggested Hermione. “After all, we’ll see him at school soon enough.”

In another universe, Harry decided Arthur Weasley was his best bet for an adult to warn about Draco Malfoy’s suspicious behavior. In this universe, he would have chosen Sirius Black, except Harry could not quite bring himself to distrust Draco so far as to think Draco’s errand was truly dangerous.

It came to much the same thing, in the end.

“Greg was quite hoping his father would be arrested,” Luna confided to Harry in a quiet aside on the train. “But no luck so far.”

Harry nodded sympathetically.

Later, Harry discovered that Greg had an ongoing Wrackspurt problem, but Luna and her father were very hopeful about treatment options.

"Petrificus Totalus!"

Without warning, Malfoy pointed his wand at Harry, who was instantly paralyzed. As though in slow
motion, he toppled out of the luggage rack and fell, with an agonizing, floor-shaking crash, at Malfoy’s feet, the Invisibility Cloak trapped beneath him, his whole body revealed with his legs still curled absurdly into the cramped kneeling position. He couldn’t move a muscle; he could only gaze up at Malfoy, who smiled broadly.

“Honestly, Harry,” Draco said, kneeling next to him and peeling the invisibility cloak off so he could see Harry’s face. “I’m sure that was very brave, but it was also entirely stupid. I can’t even treasure the picture of you falling out of a luggage rack with you wearing that cloak. Think about others for a change.”

Harry glared at him.

“You think I didn’t learn something the past few years? There’s always someone invisible listening, or someone peeking into your mind.” A sweep of cool grey eyes, up and down Harry’s paralyzed form.

“I’m sure you’ll be able to derive some sort of moral lesson from this complete and utter failure,” Draco said cheerfully.

He covered Harry in the invisibility cloak, and left.

#

A lantern was bobbing at the distant foot of the castle. Harry was so pleased to see it he felt he could even endure Filch’s wheezy criticisms of his tardiness and rants about how his timekeeping would improve with the regular application of thumbscrews. It was not until the glowing yellow light was ten feet away from them, and had pulled off his Invisibility Cloak so that he could be seen, that he recognized the hooked nose and long, black, greasy hair of Severus Snape.

“Well, well, well,” sneered Snape, taking out his wand and tapping the padlock once, so that the chains snaked backward and the gates creaked open. "Nice of you to turn up, Potter, although you have evidently decided that the wearing of school robes would detract from your appearance.”

“Got into a fight with Draco Malfoy,” Harry said.

“Did you.”

“Well.”

Harry attempted not to look guilty.

“If Minerva McGonagall is going to be smug about this to me later, I should prefer to know now.”

“…he noticed me under the invisibility cloak and got me with petrificus totalus.”

Snape looked nothing so much as amused.

"There is no need to wait, Nymphadora, Potter is quite--ah--safe in my hands."

"I meant Hagrid to get the message," said Tonks, frowning.

"Hagrid was late for the start-of-term feast, just like Potter here, so I took it instead.”

“And you wanted to yell at me about something,” Harry interpreted.

“The day I do not want to yell at you, idiot, is the day I am dead.”
Tonks, Harry noticed, had a particular expression on her face.

"Goodnight," Harry called to her over his shoulder, as he began the walk up to the school with Snape. "Thanks for ... everything,"

"See you, Harry."

Snape did not speak for a minute or so.

"Fifty points from Gryffindor for lateness, I think," said Snape. "And, let me see, another twenty for your Muggle attire. You know, I don't believe any House has ever been in negative figures this early in the term--we haven't even started pudding. You might have set a record, Potter."

“You should be happy, then.”

“I have nothing against the house of Gryffindor, Potter.”

Harry eyed his professor, who seemed just as usual – his hand holding the lantern did not shake, and his face was its usual sunless shade but not more lined than it had been last spring.

“I will thank you to stop looking at me as if I were an invalid,” Snape snapped.

“Sorry, sir,” Harry said, with as much patent insincerity as he could fit into two words.

“While we are on the subject, what possessed you to be so foolish?”

“Sir?”

“As to allow yourself to be open to coercion. I am certain I have made myself plain on the subject of attachment.”

On the subjects Harry really didn’t want to discuss with Professor Snape…. Wait.

“You’ve made yourself plain?”

“Perhaps you are under the impression that I act in this fashion to all my students, Potter? That every student attracts my ire, disgust, and fatigue as if they had drunk a potion of loathing? I have never been kind to you.”

Wow, that was far too close to discussing emotions for Harry’s comfort. Golly. Harry was silent for a while as they walked up towards the castle, trying to kick his tired brain into gear to find an answer that would suit his particular teacher.

Or perhaps he should go with an answer that wouldn’t suit his teacher.

“I ignore a lot of what you say, sir, because otherwise I never would have been able to concentrate on learning potions.”

“…idiot.”

And that, apparently, was that.
“...I suppose he finally wanted to retire from Hogwarts,” Harry said, staring at the head table in the hopes of developing spontaneous legimency.

“What do you mean?” asked Ron.

“Well, no one lasts at the Defense job, do they.”

Maybe, Harry thought darkly, Snape figured Harry would get him killed before the end of the year. Harry had been doing a good job of it so far.

"He might just go back to teaching Potions at the end of the year," said Ron reasonably. "That Slughorn bloke might not want to stay long-term. Moody didn't."

“He said he might retire at the end of my time in school, if we all survived,” Harry said, keeping his voice down. “Couldn’t tell if he was telling me I’d drive him into an early grave or saying he wanted to have more free time for the apprenticeship, honestly.”

A beat of uneasy silence fell.

“I can’t believe Filch banned my candy,” Harry added, since he didn’t want the conversation to stay dead. “They’re perfectly safe.”

“He probably minds the ones that make you blow bubbles, foam at the mouth, or go blind,” Ron pointed out.

“The blindness is a side effect,” Harry protested. “Those aren’t even for sale yet.”

“You went blind once a week all summer,” Ron told him. “Trust me, everyone noticed.”

“You really shouldn’t test unmonitored potions on yourself, Harry,” Hermione said, for the thousandth time.

“I’m getting pretty good at moving around without being able to see,” Harry protested.

“I thought you said it was an unwanted side effect?” asked Hermione.

“Well... I don’t want it, but I do know it’s there,” Harry said.

This did not draw much applause.

#

Harry was truly, deeply uncomfortable with Professor Snape teaching the Dark Arts (Defense Against the). He wanted Professor Snape to be teaching potions, where he belonged, not giving a love lecture about darkness, unfixed, mutating, indestructible. It made Harry want to scream, which made him want to be sarcastic.

It was not a good combination. Harry wasn’t even slightly startled he got detention in his very first class.

As for Professor Slughorn teaching potions, well, the less said about it the better.
Well, perhaps one thing, that occurred just before Harry’s first Potions class of the year. Professor Snape entered the classroom in deep conversation with Professor Slughorn, who seemed somewhat uncomfortable.

“Potter, may I see your textbook?” Professor Snape asked.

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, and handed it over.

Flipping Harry’s copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*, Professor Snape used it as a bludgeon, rhetorically speaking, to demolish an argument of Professor Slughorn’s. He then swept away, obviously inspecting the room. Professor Slughorn pretended he didn’t exist to address the class.

“Potter. Your book.”

Harry accepted the textbook from his professor and blinked at it. This… was not the same book. It was a battered second-hand copy. He glanced up at his teacher’s unreadable dark eyes, and decided not to ask. Certainly not in company.

Harry turned back to Slughorn’s lecture, quite as if nothing had happened. As was his habit, he let Hermione answer the questions, though he completed them in his head. Veritaserum. Polyjuice. Amortentia. He’d never tried brewing veritaserum or amortentia, having decided many years ago to avoid love potions. He had a sudden inclination to try his hand at veritaserum, though, looking at it. Felix Felicis, well. That was just motivating.

Harry recognized the handwriting that had nearly obliterated the original recipe in his textbook with a soaring, swooping feeling.

And Professor Snape wondered why Harry would plunge headlong into danger after him. Honestly.

#

Once they were securely ensconced at the Gryffindor table for dinner, however, he felt safe enough to tell them.

“It’s Professor Snape’s old book, I think,” he explained. “He gave it to me.”

“…blast,” muttered Ron.

“Ron?”

“Well, I can’t hate him anymore, can I.”

Harry had to laugh.

“You can still hate him. I think Hermione’s on board, isn’t she?”

“I don’t understand why they don’t update the textbooks,” she said mournfully. “May I see it?”

Harry resisted the urge to snarl at her.

“…I think it’s an apprenticeship thing,” Harry tried, trying to sound regretful.

Her eyes flashed.

“You’re not the only one who can get an apprenticeship, Harry Potter.”
Harry went very still, on the theory that if he was quiet he might escape from the lions.

“But who would you ask?” asked Ron. “Snape and McGonagall are already taken. No one takes more than one apprentice at a time.”

“I suppose I’ll have to figure it out,” said Hermione.

Harry would not want to be the subject of Hermione’s figuring out for love nor money.

“Who wants to practice silent casting with me?” he asked the table in general. “Professor Snape will be extra sarcastic if I haven’t made progress by next class.”

“That sounds like a job for the DA,” Hermione said in her most innocent voice. “I’ll call a meeting, shall I?”

Harry was regretting this already.

#

It was a little less thrilling having the DA reassemble without the looming threat of Umbridge discovering it. Still, Hermione never had stopped a good idea once she’d had it, and Harry did need to learn silent casting, so they sent out a call on the charmed coins on Wednesday night.

And then Draco Malfoy turned up at the Room of Requirement. Harry stared at him, standing with his hand on the door. Draco, coming down the hallway, stalled to a halt.

“Potter.”

“Malfoy.”

“What are you doing here?”

“What are you doing here?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

Harry huffed a breath, sure he looked incredulous.

“You’re not joining the DA, Malfoy. No way.”

Malfoy smiled slowly, though it didn't reach his pale eyes.

“Surely, Potter, you are aware of Hogwarts rules about clubs? Open to all students of all years and Houses, or they’re illegal?”

Harry ground his teeth.

“It is a legitimate club, isn’t it, Potter?”

“…right,” Harry gritted. “Come in, then.”

Absolutely zero people were happy to see Draco. Not one. Draco seemed happy to ignore this, stretching.

“So, when do I get to hex you, Potter?”

“We’re practicing silent casting. You can practice with Greg.”
“Oh, fine.”

And that, apparently, was that. Except that Draco picked up silent casting faster than Harry did, which was just not on at all.

Ginny silently getting him in the back with a bat-boogie hex was pretty wonderful.

Harry checked with Professor McGonagall if he had to let Draco into the DA.

He had to let Draco into the DA.

Harry settled for the simple expedient of never, ever telling Draco when DA meetings were happening.

It didn’t work. Harry suspected Greg of playing traitor.

#

Harry sought out Professor Snape on Saturday afternoon, since his evening had been claimed by Professor Dumbledore, and found him in his old office.

It was very strange to have some things change and some things stay exactly the same.

“I don’t like Professor Slughorn.”

“Nor should you. He is a coward who happens to be capable of following a recipe.”

Ouch.

“Sit, idiot.”

Harry took a seat.

“I am no longer your potions professor.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You will continue to excel at potions, and find opportunities to practice.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I trust you have prepared a study plan.”

“I want to try to make veritaserum, sir. I think it would be useful. And I need to make another batch of polyjuice, I used mine up this summer.”

“I heard about that. Next time, prepare a disguise less recognizable than Draco Malfoy.”

Someone knocked on the closed door, and then it opened.

“Yes, do, Potter,” drawled Draco from behind him. “I don’t want to be dragged into your mess.”

“Mister Malfoy,” Professor Snape said neutrally. “What can I do for you?”

“I was hoping to speak to you regarding Potter here, sir. I don’t think you should waste your time with him. I doubt he’s good for your health.”
Snape smiled slightly.

“Now, I wonder where you got that impression.”

“I overheard Potter gossiping about you last spring, sir,” Draco said casually. “I don’t think he’s very respectful.”

“I, too, have given up hope on Potter ever learning respect.” Snape paused, delicately. “I am always available to any of my students who need help, Mister Malfoy.”

Draco drew himself up, chin lifting, posture suddenly tense.

“Keep helping Potter, then,” he snapped. “He’s hopeless, after all.”

Draco slammed the door behind him.

“Potter,” Snape said thoughtfully. “I believe I shall take this afternoon to demonstrate defensive wards against entry and eavesdropping.”

It was an interesting demonstration, even if Harry burned with questions. What had they been talking about?

Slytherins. Argh.
Harry Has No Context For This

After watching the memory of the Gaunts and discussing it with Professor Dumbledore, Harry had two last-minute questions.

“But that locket—”

“Yes, Sirius informed me of it. In fact, I assisted him in its destruction, which forms a part of our puzzle. But we must proceed in order, Harry, or we will have nothing but a tangle of strings instead of a cat’s cradle.”

“And… what about Professor Snape, sir? Would it be alright if I discussed this with him?”

“No, Harry. I believe it best to avoid putting more pressure on Severus this year than he is already under. Another secret he must keep from Voldemort would not be doing him a kindness.”

“Is he… safe, sir?”

“None of us are safe in these times, Harry, but I am doing everything I can for him.”

“Thanks, professor.”

And it was time for Harry to go for the evening.

#

Harry was very glad Hermione was his friend, but he wished she had a little more sympathy when he was complaining about lessons.

“Honestly, Harry. If you never master silent casting, how are you going to manage really advanced magics, like wandless magic?”

“I just don’t see why it takes up so much time. There’s potions I could be working on, you know, and the Quidditch team, and Professor Snape’s decided to pay attention to my defensive spells.”

Hermione sniffed.

“Sometimes I think Professor Snape is right and you really are arrogant, Harry.”

“Hermione!”

“You’re the best in our year at potions and the best at defense, you don’t have to be so – so,”

“So what.”

“Why can’t you just be happy!”

Harry opened his mouth and closed it again.

“I don’t have time to breathe, Hermione. I really don’t.”

“When I did that, you all just told me to drop a subject,” she said brutally.

Harry stood up abruptly.
“Harry, if you master the charm, I’ll, I’ll. I’ll tell you why you should master silent wandless magic.”

Curious, Harry decided to stick around, even if he mostly wanted to chuck all his homework out the common room window.

The sun had set, and Hermione was yawning along with him.

“Good night, Harry. The greatest wizards, like Merlin or Dumbledore? They can fly without broomsticks.”

Harry took that thought to bed, to turn over in his mind as if he was a niffler with a galleon. Flying – really flying, not just apparating or sitting on a broomstick or a hover charm.

Harry fell asleep, and dreamed of flying.

#

Harry was doing his transfiguration homework in the library during a free period with Greg and Luna when Draco spoke from over his shoulder.

“Everything you just wrote is wrong, Potter.”

“Well, that makes sense. I’ve got no idea what she’s talking about most of the time.”

Draco snorted.

“Alright, Draco?” asked Greg. Harry, startled glanced back at Draco to see why Greg would ask that, only to catch Draco shimmering into a cat and launching himself at Greg’s chest.

Greg caught him easily, holding the little cat with gentle expertise and stroking his ears. The cat was fluffed up as if it had just spotted a rival, pupils narrow, ears slicked back.

“Er,” said Harry.

Greg settled back in his seat, seeming content to let Draco curl up in his lap and stroke Draco’s ears while working laboriously through what one could loosely term an essay, if you allowed for block lettering and Greg’s feelings about grammar.

Greg met Harry’s eyes when Harry opened his mouth.

“Leave it.”

“Er.”

“I said, leave it,” Greg growled, and Harry was abruptly reminded that Greg and Draco were still, probably, possibly friends. They were certainly still roommates.

When Harry got up for next period, he saw Greg tucking a small unprotesting white shape into his large pocket.

Harry was really worried about whatever was up with Draco Malfoy.

#

Dear Harry,
I suppose I should start off by saying that I may have told the Prime Minister of England that you were my son.

I suppose I should explain that one. I was reading your last letter, and I’ll get to that in a minute, and he asked what I was reading. So I thought about lying, decided not to, and managed to stammer by way into calling you my son. Not my suavest hour.

I know I’m not James. In the interest of diplomatic relations, though, if the muggle government asks....

Anyway, about Snape. I agree it’s worrying that he’s teaching Dark Arts, especially with the way you describe him starting the first class. He’s always been too into it, a bit the way you are with potions – but potions don’t drive you mad and leave you going on homicidal rampages, usually.

A few warning signs to watch for: pale skin, mood swings, mania or depression, increased sadism, reliance on magic when your hands or feet would do, eye color changes.

I honestly couldn’t tell you how to tell with Snape, though, since he already has all of those. I’d talk to Dumbledore if you grow increasingly concerned, he’ll know what to look for and how to fire him most efficiently.

Sirius

#

Professor Snape was not precisely avoiding Harry. Harry was not precisely avoiding Professor Snape. Still, without potions classes or regular extracurricular lessons, they did see less of each other over the first few weeks of term.

Harry was not impressed with Professor Slughorn precisely because Professor Slughorn was constantly impressed with Harry. Harry was tempted to mess up his potions deliberately just to stop the avaricious glint in the potions master’s eye, but it probably wouldn’t have worked anyway.

On the second Saturday of term, Harry had his proper detention with Professor Snape.

“Flobberworms?” Harry asked, once he reached Professor Snape’s office.

“If you finish in good time, we will discuss other possibilities.”

Harry got on with sorting rotten flobberworms, and contemplated pouring some of them over his professor’s head. Professor Snape calmly got on with grading.

It was late when Harry finished, and Professor Snape waved him to a seat after Harry had washed his hands.

“You brought your textbook?”

“Yes, sir.”

Snape pushed what appeared to be a catalog across the table. From the Diagon Alley apothecary, Harry saw when he picked it up.

“I no longer have unrestricted access to the Hogwarts potions cupboards, so we will be making alternate arrangements. Go through that and choose the ingredients you will need for batches of polyjuice and veritaserum, as well as whatever you will need for those ridiculous sweets of yours and
for our continued attempt to make sense of your myrtle failure.”

“We’re going to have to come up with a better name for it than ‘myrtle failure,’” Harry muttered, but bent his head to his textbook and his catalog, fighting off a yawn. It took basically forever.

“Now, as Sirius Black is your guardian, the normal approach would be apply to him for funds,” Snape continued.

Harry froze.

“However, I enjoy having reasons to belittle him, so I will be doing my part as your master to supply you with the relevant tools while he is off gallivanting with muggles.”

After a few moments, Snape took the catalog from Harry’s numb fingers.

“You’re dismissed.”

Harry was really not quite sure what just happened.
Harry and Hermione got into some arguments about copying Snape’s spells that he’d noted in the margins, because as she pointed out in hurried whispers, Snape had gone dark for a while, hadn’t he, and they didn’t know what age he’d started. It’s not like any of them were helpfully labeled ‘dark magic,’ now were they.

Harry didn’t give his book up, obviously, but it wasn’t the most peaceful addition to Gryffindor tower.

Ron mostly thought it was odd that Snape called himself a prince. Not exactly the most princely person, was he.

In the end, it was Draco who came to Harry, rather than Harry successfully pinning down Draco for their little chat, on a Saturday night in October after the first Hogsmeade trip. Harry, who had been preoccupied by whoever cursed Katie Bell and tried to smuggle a dark object into Hogwarts, almost didn’t see him. He was perched on Greg’s shoulder as a cat, a position he’d occupied more and more between classes over the past few weeks.

“Are you too good to walk places on your own?” Harry asked the cat, as he tried to edge around Greg to leave the dining hall. Greg did not allow himself to be edged.

Harry, who had been preoccupied with Draco all day, stopped moving. His instincts were screaming that this was Draco’s doing, that Draco had used the *imperius* curse on Katie and that Draco had bought the necklace, but everyone else seemed to think that he was mad, that Draco wasn’t a Death Eater, that there was an innocent explanation. That Draco had been doing transfiguration tutoring, and that wasn’t just him having a convenient alibi.

Harry would really love for there to be an innocent explanation.

After a few seconds with them all staring at each other, Draco jumped down from Greg’s shoulder and turned human.

“We’re having a party, Potter. Come along.”

“A party.”

“Yes. Keep up.”

“Harry, everything okay?” asked Ron, coming up beside them.

“Yes, fine,” Harry said. Ron hadn’t exactly been supportive of Harry’s theories, after all. It was a chance to investigate.

“See you upstairs?”

Harry nodded.

“In a bit.”

Draco beckoned, and with Draco in front of him and Greg lurking behind, Harry found himself trailing up the stairs to the Room of Requirement.
Draco did the pacing, and they entered through a solid-looking wooden door that had, yes, bars on the inside of the door. This was going wonderfully, so far.

Greg pulled double handfuls of bottles of butterbeer out of his pockets and set them on a round table in the center of the room. Harry was beginning to get the impression that Greg was copying Harry’s theory on pockets. (The more the better, the deeper the better, the end.)

The room was dark, lit only by a fireplace, and old couches surrounded the battered round table. Harry sat on one of the couches, where he could watch both of them warily.

Draco eyed him right back, grey eyes assessing.

“Greg, you may go,” Draco said. “I think Harry would rather talk to me alone.”

“’S that right?” Greg asked.

“…yeah,” Harry said. It’s not like he’d have any luck getting Draco to be honest with a witness, even one so trustworthy as Greg.

“G’night,” Greg grunted, and left the room. Draco bolted the door.

“Being a bit paranoid, aren’t you?”

“I learned from Professor Crouch too, you know. *Hominim revelo*.”

They were the only people in the room. Harry sighed.

“I know anti-intruder and anti-eavesdropper spells, if you’re going to be like this.”

“Please, go ahead.”

So Harry cast the spells, and kept his wand out, just in case this was a particularly arcane assassination plot.

“Sit,” Draco added after a minute.

Harry sat. Draco opened two butterbeers, poured his into a glass, and took a sip.

“Cheers,” he said. “To your horrible relatives, may they rot in hell.”

Oh.

“…somehow, I wasn’t expecting this.”

“I’ll have a drink with Greg when his father snuffs it, and I’ll have a drink with you tonight. I just had to wait until someone could go get some butterbeer.”

Draco opened another bottle of butterbeer, poured it into the other glass, and slid the glass across the table.

“It’s not wine, but it’s passable. You hated them. We’re celebrating that they’re dead. You don’t have to admit it to anyone else. C’mon, Harry,” Draco said with a smile. “You think I’ll judge?”

Harry… did not think Draco would judge. He picked up the glass of butterbeer and stared at it.

“Let me see if I’m summarizing this correctly. You’re happy they’re gone. Happy you never have to
see them again. Ecstatic Sirius Black got custody of you, legally, because it means you have a real family. And you can’t say any of that to anyone, because you feel so bloody guilty about being the reason people die.”

Harry took a big gulp of butterbeer.

“And tomorrow,” Draco continued brutally, “You can go back to feeling guilty and horrible and like the weight of the world is on your shoulders. Tonight, we are going to have a party, because you hated them and they’re dead.”

Harry took a more controlled sip of butterbeer.

“I’m here to talk to you about Katie Bell.”

“Then you’ll have to stick around for your party, won’t you. Nice timing.”

“Draco.”

“Relax. Drink. I hear it’s what people do at parties.”

“Aren’t parties supposed to have music?”

“Hm.” And suddenly there was a lacquered box on the table. Draco grinned and opened it, and a soft operetta began to play.

“You have crap taste in music,” Harry told him frankly.

“And you are a peasant, as usual. I expect you like muggle music.”

“Well. Yes.”

Draco sighed.

“I’ll talk about my feelings,” Harry said, “If you show me.”

“Hm?”

“You know what I’m talking about, Draco. Your arm.”

Draco blinked at him, grey eyes cool and distant, expression a faint snarl.

“Trade.”

“You first, then, Harry.”

Harry twisted his glass of butterbeer in his hands, and listened to the music for a while.

“I think,” he said after a while, “That if he wanted to give me a present, he should have let me make the choice myself. He chose whether to kill his own father. He wouldn’t have liked it if someone else had done it for him.”

“You think that’s why he did it?”

“He signed the name he shared with his father on the letter he used to provoke my uncle into breaking the wards. It wasn’t exactly subtle.”

“But, on the other hand,” said Draco, “He was rather cross with you at the time.”
Harry snorted.

“Rather cross. I’m sure that’s one way to put it.”

“I’m trying to be subtle in my language.”

“Good job. Really, good job. What’d you do to Katie Bell?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean. I have nothing against Katie Bell.”

Harry drank the last of his butterbeer and threw the glass across the room, where it shattered. Draco jumped half a foot.

“Don’t play that game with me, Malfoy.”

“Then don’t ask idiotic questions. I’m not going to Azkaban for your entertainment, Potter.”

They both fell silent. The music kept play. Draco, after a few moments, conjured up another glass for Harry and slid it across the table. Harry poured himself more butterbeer.

“They deserved better than to be reduced to a footnote in my biography,” Harry said. “They weren’t perfect – they were bloody awful, really, no sense of humor, terrified of foreigners and jokes and anyone different and me, but—“

“Granted that, granted that you aren’t happy they’re dead… anything you’d like to say?”

“I’ll never get a chance to hex Uncle Vernon unconscious, or punch him in the face, or all the other things I used to dream about doing. I’ll never be able to tell Aunt Petunia I don’t need her charity anymore. That – that I regret.”

“If you want someone to go with you to yell at their graves, I play a mean cat.”

Harry grinned humorlessly, and drank some more butterbeer.

Draco unbuttoned his cuff and rolled up his sleeve, baring the dark tattoo on his forearm, black and angry. Harry tried to avoid staring.

“…did it hurt?”

“Mm.”

That, Harry thought, was a yes.

“You’re in trouble.”

“The Dark Lord,” Draco said precisely, “Is not pleased with my father.”

“Huh.” Harry thought about that one. “Not exactly a state secret, that.”

Draco smiled thinly, and rebuttoned his cuff.

“No. Not exactly a state secret. Here’s one that might be – I’m supposed to keep a close eye on Professor Snape this year.”

Harry put his glass down and stared at it, hard. It held no answers.

“Still won’t go to Dumbledore?” he asked after a minute.
“And what, exactly, would I tell my parents? Father didn’t put his heart and soul into this for me to… to….”

“Repent?”

“Abandon him. When he needs me. My parents are alive, Harry.”

“I’m going to stop you. Whatever you’re doing.”

“Maybe. I’m quite subtle these days, you know.”

“And Professor Snape calls me arrogant. Today wasn’t subtle.”

“Today – from what I’ve heard – was indeed not subtle.”

Harry frowned at him, but Draco’s bland expression told him nothing.

“You,” Harry said precisely, “Are incredibly suspicious. Aurors should lock you up on sight.”

“Thank you, Harry.”

Harry could have left then, but he didn’t. Instead, he talked about Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia. He talked about Dudley getting a new tricycle, while Harry made friends with a spider because Dudley scared the other children away. He talked about setting a boa constrictor on Dudley. He talked about how he and Aunt Petunia had almost been getting along, by never being in the same room.

He drank a lot of butterbeer, and Draco asked quiet questions, and eventually, far past curfew, they went their separate ways to bed.
Harry let things slide, of course. He had too many things on his plate not to. His letters to Sirius were short and to the point, if warm and full of teasing. He came to only some of the meetings of the DA, preferring to let it become a little less centered on him and a bit more of the older students tutoring the younger ones who were trailing in. When he got a revised version of his monograph back in the morning post from Professor Snape, he revised it in snatches without really thinking about it too much. He definitely left trying out the Slug Club for later.

Hermione, despite Ron and Harry’s mild efforts to talk her out of the apprenticeship idea, seemed to have decided that she should study for a mastery without the benefit of a master.

“But what are you doing?” Harry asked, looking helplessly at the new piles of viciously dry-looking tomes surrounding Hermione on that particular evening.

“Ward-making and wizarding law,” Hermione said, sucking on a peppermint. “I couldn’t decide. Did you know there’s no such thing as a wizard lawyer?”

Harry considered the trials he’d seen, which certainly had seemed to lack lawyers. He wasn’t sure that lawyers would have improved them much.

“How many areas of law?”

“Control of magical creatures, of course.”

Buckbeak (Whitherwings). Dobby and the house elves. Of course.

“And criminal law concerning the dark arts,” she added.

Harry glared at her.

“If this is a competition to see which of us can go mad first, I won last year. But – actually. Is that one of my peppermints?”

Hermione smiled at him.

“I didn’t buy it from Fred and George’s shop, Harry. You gave me these over the summer when I asked.”

“I… don’t remember.”

“You were a little distracted.”

Harry decided to see if Ron wanted to go play Quidditch, instead of continuing to harass Hermione about her life choices. She could, after all, probably handle it.

Maybe he’d just stop bothering her about the Malfoy problem, take it off her list.

#

Trying to discuss Draco with Professor Dumbledore went precisely nowhere, so Harry decided his next step was Professor Snape. He knew Draco pretty well, didn’t he? The next opportunity that presented itself for Harry to discuss it with him was the night of the new moon, which had become a standard night for them to venture out into the forest to collect this and that, according to what
seemed to Harry mysterious whims.

As was typical on outings when Professor Snape was not barking instructions, he allowed Harry to ramble on without much interruption, aside from a few pointed questions when he thought Harry was being particularly idiotic.

“I think Ron and Hermione might be thinking about going out, and I think I need to pin Draco down.“

“About going out?” Professor Snape asked, in a desert-dry voice.

“About being a Death Eater and almost getting Katie Bell killed,” Harry said.

“Accusations of that nature against a fellow student… shall I take points, Potter?”

“I saw his Dark Mark, but I didn’t get a confession about Katie. Professor Dumbledore said he was taking all appropriate steps to investigate.”

“Then I suggest you trust Professor Dumbledore,” Professor Snape said icily.

Harry considered the suddenly frigid silence.

“I thought we all decided that we weren’t going to keep things from me for no reason.”

“That does not mean we will not keep things from you for a reason. Do you think you have the right to be informed of every aspect of the war? You have your own concerns, Potter.”

“Name one.”

“Quidditch.”

“Professor- that’s not fair.

“Improving your meager skills in spellcraft past the adolescent level.”

Professor Snape, Harry realized with a sinking feeling, was going on a tear. Wonderful.

“Your idiotic venture into capitalism, courtesy of the Weasley twins.”

“I’m not doing much with that right now-“

“Cease interrupting. Your studies with Professor Dumbledore, which are the best use of your time, and your attempt to master potions in as short a time as possible. And you think you have time to play prefect for Draco Malfoy.”

Harry waited, in the faint light of their lumos spell, but Professor Snape seemed to be done.

“He’s in trouble.”

“Many people are in trouble, Potter. Draco Malfoy makes his own trouble, as you well know.”

Harry said nothing, because he’d spotted a patch of white moonflowers and now was a good time to harvest flowers and a bad time to respond to Professor Snape.

“You cannot go running across the country after every person in pain, Potter,” Professor Snape said, sounding very tired. “Professor Dumbledore wishes to keep the war from your door for just a little
while longer, while you prepare. The best and kindest thing you can do is to take all the time you can to prepare, as he wishes.”

It was Harry’s turn to be chilly after that one, and they passed some interesting time stunning owls out of trees for a few feathers and then an energetic hour avoiding the centaur herd.

“The problem is,” Harry said carefully after he was sure they wouldn’t be kicked to death by angry centaurs and that he could keep his temper, “Draco isn’t across the country, he’s right here. And whether or not he thinks he’s a criminal mastermind, he’s really not. I’m almost certain he was involved with Katie’s accident, and I’m certain he didn’t mean to kill her.”

“I cannot decipher,” Professor Snape said in a colorless voice, still struggling to catch his breath after their run, “If you are Draco Malfoy’s friend or enemy.”

Harry sat down on a convenient rock to catch his breath. Professor Snape was leaning against a tree. The clearing was dead dark, which was somehow relaxing, though Harry was aware they’d been lucky to avoid spraining an ankle. Harry had a nasty set of scratches on his hand from something—he suspected blackberries, but if his hand turned purple he was going to the hospital wing tomorrow.

“We’re friends,” Harry said eventually. “We’re on opposite sides of the war and he might try to kill me someday, but we’re friends. I might have to help lock him up in prison, though I don’t think I could stand to kill him. I’d say… I don’t know, honorable enemies… except he’s never met a concept of honor he didn’t want to stab in the back when it wasn’t looking for efficiency’s sake.”

That startled a bark of laughter from Professor Snape.

“I am friends with his mother,” Professor Snape said very quietly. “Though her view of me is less fraught than Draco’s view of you must be.”

“I think she was worried about him, this summer. I saw them in Diagon Alley.”

“You’ve chosen him as your latest target of investigation,” Professor Snape said flatly. “Like a little terrier dog, harrying its prey into the ground through sheer exhaustion.”

“No one’s told me I’m wrong about him being involved with Katie Bell.”

Silence stretched between them.

“You trust me,” Professor Snape said.

“Er.”

“You would not come into the dark of the Forbidden Forest with me at your back if you did not.” A delicate pause. “Will it be sufficient for you to trust me in this, Potter? That I am aware of the situation, and taking appropriate action.”

“That’s what Dumbledore said,” Harry said, suddenly suspicious. “Appropriate actions.”

“One appropriate action is discussing the matter with the accused’s head of house,” Snape said smoothly.

“So you want me to do—nothing.”

“Do nothing. Say nothing. Restrain your impulse to dig and dig until you find yourself in a hole you cannot get out of.”
“...I'll try, will that do?”

“That will do. Idiot. Come along, we should go back to Hogwarts before dawn.”

There was a faint note of relief in Professor Snape’s voice, Harry noted down, and then mentally chided himself for being unable to keep what was mostly a promise for more than thirty seconds.
“Hermione,” Harry said, one Wednesday evening before the first Quidditch match of the season, “Do you have a minute?”

“No.” She smiled at him, though, and said, “But what is it?”

“It’s, um, this.” Harry handed over a towering stack of parchment, bound together in red twine. “You said you wanted to proofread my monograph before it was printed, and Professor Snape says this is my last chance to make any changes. If you could try the recipes and see if they come out consistently with those instructions – be careful about stray thoughts, that’s how I ended up with one that ate varnish and I don’t know where it’s ended up but that’s why Filch hates me now—” Harry paused to take a breath. Hermione made a ‘get on with it’ gesture. “Anyway, I think I’ve mucked something up in the section about runic symbolism and possibilities of variation between the norse and Germanic runic alphabets, so… help?”

“I didn’t really want to memorize wizarding inheritance law anyway,” she said, pulling the monograph to her and dunking her quill in her inkwell. “Who are you going to get to print it?”

“Well—”

The portrait door opened and Ron called, “Harry?”

“Yeah?” Harry called back.

Ron crawled in and came over to speak in a quick, panicked whisper.

“Practice started fifteen minutes ago. I told everyone to do drills and then when they didn’t listen to me I told them you appointed me assistant captain and they had to do what I said, but I think there’ll be a rebellion if you don’t get out there in the rain with us.”

Harry blinked at him.

“Oh, thank Merlin,” Harry said after a minute. “Ron, you’re my assistant captain in charge of schedules and training and plays and, uh….”

Ron was gaping at him.

“Basically everything,” Harry concluded firmly. “I’ll overrule you if I think I have to, I have been playing longer, but – please?”

“But I’m rubbish!” Ron protested. “I’m only on the team because there was no one better.”

“You’re fantastic,” Harry said firmly. “If I could just confund you to remember that, we’d be in business.”

Hermione was laughing at them. Harry did not appreciate it very much.

#

Ginny Weasley was a problem. She was a very pretty problem, but Harry hadn’t been this distracted by Cho, not ever.

“Potter.” Defense had just ended. Malfoy was lurking in the background, so Harry just blinked at
Professor Snape and said, “Yes, professor?”

“When I say that I expect your essay on veritaserum on Monday evening, I do not mean Tuesday.”

Harry winced.

“Explain.”

“I was practicing my hexes, got, er, distracted, and it took me a while to wake up from being stunned.”

“And what distracted you?”

“Er.” Harry paused, but did not spontaneously melt through the floor and disappear. He managed to mumble something involving the word ‘girl.’

“While you are my apprentice, you will never find yourself with time to date. You will have to consider your priorities, or you will maim yourself when your attention wavers.”

Harry scowled.

“Yes, sir.”

Ginny Weasley was definitely a problem.

#

In another universe, Harry Potter implied to Ron that he was sharing felix felicis with him to help him get his head in gear about the Quidditch match against Slytherin. In this universe, Harry had long years of experience talking Ron or Hermione into trying potions, and had a sense of ethics about lying to people about what he was making them drink.

In both universes, Gryffindor won the match. In both universes, this did not miraculously fix whatever was up between Ron and Hermione.

#

Somehow, despite working on his monograph for more than a year, Harry still didn’t actually believe it was done until he had the book, bound in plain green, in his hands. It was breakfast, and the owl post had arrived. An Introduction to Runic and Life Magicks in Cleansing Potions by S. Snape and H. J. Potter was not anything very exciting to write home about, and Harry certainly hadn’t enjoyed the actual writing parts, which mostly made him feel self-conscious, but it was done. That was something.

Then he got the other four owls, each bearing letters with names he recognized from books – and wasn’t that the uncle who invented the wolfsbane potion? He opened the first one. Dear Harry Potter… impressed with this work at your age… some questions… perhaps you have considered the alternate correspondence of the death rune and lilies… He opened the next. Dear Harry Potter… despite my skepticism, upon my attempt… hope your master has considered the folly of distracting you with this at this critical time… wish you all the best of luck. The rest were like that, too, old men and one woman who knew more than him, better than him, and included no return addresses. It was not, Harry realized, a good time to be a potions master in England. How Professor Snape had gotten them copies… well, Harry had always thought owls were rather uncanny about the whole thing.

One snowy morning in early December, Harry received a letter in (nearly) entirely the same vein.
Dear Harry Potter,

I chanced upon a copy of your monograph, after having heard something about it through the grapevine. I thought it pleasantly concise, and enjoyed that it did not attempt to do too much with the discovery. Congratulations.

Upon further thought, I believe the key correspondence is not cleaning, but having an effect upon the physical realm, a mission. I suspect a growth potion, such as one might use in a garden, would be an effective candidate, though I do not currently have time to test my theory.

The note was unsigned, but Harry recognized the handwriting from another letter last summer. He knew his mail was screened by the Ministry, so it probably wasn’t cursed. Still, it left him feeling awful somehow, even after he burned it.

#

Harry found it personally offensive that people were trying to use love potions on him, but at least it was a nice change to brood about that instead of brooding about Voldemort, who was still in the papers murdering people even as he wrote pleasant notes to Harry with no conception that Harry might not welcome his input.

With all that in mind, it gave Harry great pleasure to toss any and all foodstuffs given to him out the tower window.

This, admittedly, led to an unfortunate incident involving a third-year silly enough to eat chocolates that fell from the sky, but that’s another story.

In another universe, Harry asked Luna Lovegood to Slughorn’s party. In this universe, Harry was aware that would have led to his swift murder at the hands of Greg Goyle, and didn’t.

"Harry Potter!" said Professor Trelawney in deep, vibrant tones, noticing him for the first time.

"Oh, hello," said Harry unenthusiastically.

"My dear boy!" she said in a very carrying whisper. "The rumors! The stories! The Chosen One! Of course, I have known for a very long time... the omens were never good, Harry... but why have you not returned to Divination? For you, of all people, the subject is of the utmost importance!"

"Ah, Sybill, we all think our subject's most important!" said a loud voice, and Slughorn appeared at Professor Trelawney's other side, his face very red, his velvet hat a little askew, a glass of mead in one hand and an enormous mince pie in the other. "But I don't think I've ever known such a natural at Potions!" said Slughorn, regarding Harry with a fond, if bloodshot, eye. "Instinctive, you know--like his mother! I've only ever taught a few with this kind of ability, I can tell you that, Sybill--why even Severus --"

And to Harry's horror, Slughorn threw out an arm and seemed to scoop Snape out of thin air toward them.

"Stop skulking and come and join us, Severus!" hiccuped Slughorn happily. "I was just talking about Harry's exceptional potion-making! Some credit must go to you, of course, you taught him for five years!"

Trapped, with Slughorn's arm around his shoulders, Snape looked down his hooked nose at Harry, his black eyes narrowed.
“Anyone learns through enough repetition. Eventually.”

“Oh, you’re too modest, Severus! He’s a credit to you, a credit. Why, I’ve never seen a better first attempt at a Draught of Living Death.”

“I am certain there is room for improvement.”

“And I hear a rumor – a rumor – that there is a monograph with the name H.J. Potter in circulation in select circles. I’m quite hurt not to have seen a copy, my boy!”

Harry tried to keep from hunching his shoulders and saying that he didn’t think Slughorn would have had any useful comments. It didn’t seem kind.

“I’ve got a spare,” Harry tried. “But it’s just a bit of fun, really, nothing earth-shattering.”

“Nonsense, nonsense! Such potential. Why, you’ll be creating the next Wolfsbane before we know it. Like your mother, a natural-“

“Professor Slughorn,” Harry interrupted desperately, “I’ve been meaning to ask you a few questions about veritaserum-“

But it was too late, he saw out of the corner of his eye, Professor Snape’s expression had already darkened. Professor Slughorn, Harry thought with great disgust, had all the diplomacy of an ugly brick thrown through a window into a china shop. As if Harry wanted people talking about his dead mother, let alone Professor Snape.

A convenient distraction intervened: Draco Malfoy... being dragged by the ear toward them by Argus Filch.

"Professor Slughorn," wheezed Filch, his jowls aquiver and the maniacal light of mischief-detection in his bulging eyes, "I discovered this boy lurking in an upstairs corridor. He claims to have been invited to your party and to have been delayed in setting out. Did you issue him with an invitation?"

Malfoy pulled himself free of Filch's grip, looking furious.

Harry was really not sure what instinct compelled him, seeing the desperation under Draco’s anger, to say, interrupting Draco before Draco could come up with some story, “He’s on my invitation, Professors.”

“Oh-ho,” said Slughorn, with a knowing and drunken grin.

“As a friend!” Harry hastily edited, backtracking. “Not that we’re friends, we’re not at all, I just meant-“

“Honestly, Potter,” Draco drawled. “I traded my help with his abysmal transfiguration grade for an invitation, if that satisfies all concerned?”

"That's all right, Argus, that's all right," said Slughorn, waving a hand. "It's Christmas, and it's not a crime to want to come to a party."

For a moment, Harry caught a look of anger and fear on Snape’s face, and wondered about it, and then felt guilty for wondering.

Draco, meanwhile, moved smoothly to chat with Professor Slughorn, bracketing Harry on one side so he couldn’t edge away. Harry would much prefer to have edged away.
"I'd like a word with you, Draco," said Snape suddenly.

"Now, Severus," said Slughorn, hiccuping again, "it's Christmas, don't be too hard--"

"I'm his Head of House, and I shall decide how hard, or otherwise, to be," said Snape curtly. "Follow me, Draco."

#

"I know what you're up to! You want to steal my glory!"

There was another pause, then Snape said coldly, "You are speaking like a child. I quite understand that your father's capture and imprisonment has upset you, but--"

Harry had barely a second's warning; he heard Malfoy's footsteps on the other side of the door and flung himself out of the way just as it burst open.

He reached out and grabbed Draco’s arm, pulling him sharply against the wall and throwing the cloak over both of them. Draco, who’d been going for his wand, stilled, and they watched Professor Snape stalk away down the hall.

Harry spoke once he was out of sight.

“Come back to the party. Don’t act more suspicious than you already are.”

“Hm. You just don’t want to lose your date.”

“I’m not your- you-“

“You’re just lucky the only thing I need in a date is for them to stand there and look pretty,” Draco said, patting his cheek condescendingly. “Just so you know, I’m not doing your transfiguration homework after this artful little bit of eavesdropping.”

“Didn’t really think you were. And you’re not my date.”

Everyone thought Draco was Harry’s date, and it was an absolute disaster. Draco chatted with everyone, Hermione looked at Harry very strangely, and Professor Slughorn kept giggling.

Draco transfigured his robes into more elaborate, sparkly versions of themselves and Harry wanted to die.
He didn’t have time to talk about Snape and Draco’s conversation with Ron and Hermione before Christmas break occurred and Harry was swept home to Grimmauld Place to spend a few weeks with Sirius and Dudley. It left Harry antsy.

It seemed like a nice way for Voldemort to back his teacher into a corner, to Harry, ensuring that the double agent couldn’t double agent about it. It was useful information – but it was also rather scary, once he asked Sirius what an Unbreakable Vow was. Harry missed Ron and Hermione desperately, but they had families of their own to go home to.

Dudley seemed much recovered from his summer storminess, and had lost some weight. He was still tremendously fat, but Harry would have found it stranger if he wasn’t. He talked to Harry about his new school and new friends and new clothes and new playstation until Harry was quite sure he would scream, but Harry did not scream, and tried to look interested.

Sirius only barely got away for Christmas, but Remus turned up for Christmas Eve and helped Harry decorate. Rather, helped Harry run herd on Kreacher, who had decided that the house should be decorated in Old Black Style, which Harry knew would give Sirius some sort of horrid family flashbacks.

Harry wanted the only horrid family flashbacks this Christmas to be his and Dudley’s.

On Christmas morning, Harry opened his presents with Sirius, Remus, and Dudley, and felt like his family was very strange and cobbled together from odd broken parts, but wonderful all the same.

He got a letter by owl, sitting in front of the kitchen fire, and tried not to cringe. Harry was not enjoying his mail very much lately.

The handwriting, however, made him perk up.

“What’s that?” asked Sirius, around a bite of breakfast sausage.

“Letter from Professor Snape. It’s… oh.” Harry grinned. “He’s finally given me the recipe for Wolfsbane.”

“…you’re learning to make Wolfsbane?” asked Sirius into the sudden silence.

“I’ve been working on it ever since third year,” Harry said absently, reading the instructions. “He hasn’t let me even see the full recipe until now, said I’d kill someone… he must have been alright with that batch of veritaserum I made after all….”

Sirius swept Harry up into a giant hug, and Harry squeaked.

“Sirius?”

“You’re a good kid, Harry. A really good kid.”

Remus, Harry noticed, was looking away from them both. Harry… had no idea what to do with this.

“Can I read my recipe?”

“Go ahead, go ahead. It’s fiendishly complicated, right?”

Wolfsbane
“It’s mostly that any mistake could poison the, um, werewolf, thus the name. And of course it’s
dreadfully poisonous for the potion maker if they get it on their skin or breathe too many fumes. The
trick is… oh, that’s complicated… hm….”

Harry lost track of the conversation from there, but no one seemed to mind him being distracted.

Conversation turned back to Professor Snape over lunchtime, but the Wolfsbane recipe seemed to
have convinced both Sirius and Remus that Professor Snape was really very misunderstood, and that
things at Hogwarts couldn’t be that bad. Harry did not find the conversation about what Remus had
been up to all that much more reassuring, though at least Sirius had funny muggle stories, and a plan
involving a new motorbike that had Remus talking sense into him for an hour, which they both
seemed to enjoy very much.

Harry rather thought that Remus had missed having Sirius around to talk sense into, rather as if
Hermione had suddenly lacked him and Ron to scold into doing homework. It made him think about
Hermione and Ron not talking, and suddenly Harry was back to being cross.

He tried very hard not to be smug about getting more presents than Dudley, he really did.

For Christmas dinner, they were joined by Tonks, though no one would tell Harry why. She sat next
to Remus, and Sirius kept shooting them little calculating looks when he thought no one was
looking. It was good, Harry thought with fondness, that no one had ever thought
Sirius should be a spy.

Being around a grown up witch girl had a delightfully tongue-tying effect on Dudley, and they
weren’t going to discuss Order business over Christmas dinner, so they had ham and Harry asked
Tonks about her work for the Ministry.

Kreacher, wearing his new embroidered tea towel with a flight of reindeer dancing on the front,
asked Sirius, “Is master ready for the second course?”

“No, thanks, Kreacher,” Sirius said, distracted by Tonks’ tale. “Get more of the sides.”

Harry thought Kreacher looked very smug about having achieved orders and order out of the group
eating around the dining room table. Harry had decided that letting Kreacher fuss over his outfit for
the day was easier than enduring Kreacher talking about barbarians for all of Christmas. Harry was
almost certain Sirius hadn’t noticed they were all being successfully bullied into manners by his
house elf, with Harry’s assistance. (Harry mostly found Kreacher’s relationship with Dudley
hilarious, because Harry was probably a bad person.)

In another universe, the Minister of Magic used Percy Weasley as an excuse to meet Harry over
Christmas. In this universe, there was no way anyone was letting him in on the secret of Harry’s
location. Instead, Harry had a celebratory row on Boxing Day with Dudley over Dudley breaking
one of Harry’s new presents, and Sirius sprayed them both with water like stray cats.

Harry was beginning to get the impression he and Sirius would never have time to have that row
about Harry’s trip to the Department of Mysteries while the war was still on, because after that Sirius
had to go guard things again, leaving Harry and Dudley to sort themselves out.

#

Harry told Hermione all about Draco and Snape as soon as he got back to school from Christmas,
which left her looking very pale and saying she needed to research Unbreakable Vows, before
rushing out of the common room.
Hermione, Harry thought, really needed to detach herself from the library before she grew roots like a tree.

Harry did not tell Dumbledore about the conversation between Draco and Snape, because Harry knew that he had promised Professor Snape to trust him and stay out of it, and Harry was not the sort of person who gave the same person the same warning twice if it was not well-received the first time. He was going to deal with Slughorn for the man, and that would have to do.

#

Having the entire school think he was gay cut down some on the feminine ambushes, but Harry could have lived without Cormac McLaggan ambushing him for 101 Great Quidditch Saves By Cormac McLaggan, Want To Get A Drink? He couldn’t even kill Draco over it, because it had been his stupid idea.

Then there was the conversation with Ron.

“Look, mate, I just wanted you to know, it’s alright if you like blokes. With me. As long as you don’t like me. I mean, that way.”

“Merlin, Ron, stop,” Harry said, covering his face in both hands.

“But you can’t date Cormac McLaggan, he’s a git, and I’ll fight him. He wouldn’t treat you right.”

“I’m not a girl.”

“No, but you’re…."

“I’m what,” Harry snarled.

“It’s my job to take care of you, isn’t it? Make sure you’re doing alright. That’s what a best mate’s for.”

“I’m not dating Cormac McLaggan.”

Ron gave him a doubtful look.

“Ron, I am this close to asking your sister out and hexing Dean Thomas into next week, that’s how much I’m not dating Cormac McLaggan.”

Ron looked… thoughtful.

“I reckon that’d be alright. We could be properly brothers that way. I could ask Ginny if she still likes you-?”

Harry tackled him, completely and utterly out of patience.

It was not, Harry admitted privately to himself, that he was disinterested in blokes. He’d never really thought about it one way or another. But he was, he was pretty sure, the sort of person who only liked one person at a time, and for better or worse right now, that person was Ginny.
“Draco wants a word,” Greg told Harry during a quiet moment in late January in the library. “Astronomy tower, tonight after curfew.”

“He’s going to get us both expelled,” Harry muttered, and thought about not accepting the invitation all the rest of the day. At least until he asked Hermione what she thought, and she said he should definitely go – after all, hadn’t he been wondering what Draco had been up to?

“I sort of promised Professor Snape to leave it alone,” Harry muttered.

“Oh. But – he’s got an Unbreakable Vow, Harry. Maybe you weren’t really promising him so much as his promise?”

This had not previously occurred to Harry. It convinced him, frowning, to take the meeting.

#

Harry brought his cloak and his Map to the meeting, which meant explaining the Map to Draco. Draco stared at him, looking like he hadn’t been sleeping and possibly was being tortured, and said, “Sometimes I truly hate you. Do you know what I could do with that?”

“Nothing I’d let you do,” Harry said. “But it’s not fool proof.”

“If anyone catches us, we were snogging,” Draco said lightly.

“…no.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, was your dignity more important than the war?”

Harry grumbled to himself, and then they settled themselves for their chat, sitting next to each other with a view of the star-filled lake. Harry could see why people came up here to be romantic. Harry would have preferred to come up here someday with someone he was actually dating.

“What do you want, Draco?”

“Well. I had a homework assignment for the Christmas holidays. From Hermione, actually. She told me I had to figure out for myself which side of the war I was on, really, rather than trying to play every side.”

“That… makes sense,” Harry decided to ask Hermione about it, later. In detail.

“But I can’t stand any of them. Dumbledore’s a sanctimonious prig who wouldn’t throw me into a lake if I was on fire. The Dark Lord….”

“Is crazy,” Harry supplied.

“You think so?” Draco asked softly.
“I’ve gotten to know him pretty well, the past year or so, since he came back. He’s not just arrogant, erratic, and prejudiced. He’s not just a murderer. Some sort of… something that’s there in other people isn’t there for him. He doesn’t see where he goes wrong.” Harry paused. “He wrote me a nice congratulatory note on my monograph.”

“So,” Draco said, rallying. “I would like you to join a side. My side. You’d be my second recruit, after Greg.”

“…no. That’s stupid.”

Draco hissed between his teeth, and stood.

“Fine. Fine, I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“Sit down, Draco,” Harry hurried to say. “I didn’t mean I don’t understand the idea. Just… sit down. Let me talk for a minute.”

Draco hovered undecided for a minute. Harry held very stilly.

Draco sat back down.

“I see why you’d want that,” Harry said slowly. “But you’re not – it wouldn’t be your side. It’d be a side you were on. I know you, ah….” He trailed off, and decided to be blunt. “Your plans are terrible. If it were going to be anyone’s side, based on who does the planning, it’d be Hermione’s.”

“Hermione. You want me, to be subordinate to that?”

“Her. Yes. Because she’s smarter than us, and better at magic than us, and better at planning than us. I can lead a fight, but I can’t plan a… a war, Draco. That’s not who I am.”

Draco was struggling with his temper.

“You’ll have to get used to it,” Harry suggested, “For when she’s Minister of Magic.”

“Hermione Granger.”


“Chief of the Wizengamot, like Dumbledore.”

“Hmm,” Harry said agreeably.

“Severus Snape, Headmaster of Hogwarts.”

“Er.”

“He deserves it.”

“I don’t… disagree. I just don’t know if he wants it.”

“Consider – he’d be able to avoid students almost all the time.”

“Huh.” Harry had to admit, it was an idea. “Hermione would say that I was in charge. That’s what she did with the DA.”
“I’m not working for Hermione.” Draco paused. “And a lot of other purebloods wouldn’t either.”

“You think I’ll get other purebloods in this – this – thing?”

“The Ministry’s worried about your political power. They’re wrong, of course, you have no idea how to use it, but they are.”

Harry considered Draco, who was proud and unpleasant and occasionally helpful and looked spectacularly awful.

The problem was, Harry really did have a saving people thing. And no matter how weirdly Draco was going about it, Draco was basically asking for help.

“Right,” Harry said. “Well, how much trouble will you be in if you just tell Voldemort to stuff it?”

Draco giggled half-hysterically.

“I’m in quite enough trouble stalling, thank you.”

“Stalling… isn’t actually the worst plan.”

“Hermione’s.”

“…need to have a talk with her.”

“Mm.”

“I mean… when’d you start listening to Hermione?”

“Last year, when you had the Dark Lord in your mind and I was going half-mad with worry.”

“You look half-mad now.”

“Christmas was not - pleasant.”

“…right.”

“Hermione said you’d told both Professor Snape and Professor Dumbledore I was acting suspicious and they said they’d deal with it?”

“Mhmm.”

“They haven’t.”

Harry swore inside his head, quite viciously.

“Hermione had quite a nasty lecture for me about collateral damage, so you can stop giving me that look.”

“Right. Going to tell me what this is all about, then?”

“No.”

“Draco….”

“Guess.”
“Right. Well… you’re trying to kill someone.”

“I’m trying to fail to kill someone. In a way that can’t be blamed on me. Except they’ve given me Professor Snape as backup, and he’s competent.”

“…we got Greg out.”

“Greg doesn’t have hostages.”

“I didn’t think you thought that about your parents.” Draco seemed to have no comment about that. “What… changed your mind?”

“Two things. I always thought the Dark Lord’s return would be… glorious. Instead, his new world is just… I can’t see myself at the top of it, not really. Not without becoming someone really different, and I don’t want to. The other thing is… I know you. I think you’re going to win.”

“Huh.”

It had never consciously occurred to Harry to think he was going to win, though now that he thought about it, he’d quite like to.

Draco glanced over at him, a strange light in his pale eyes.

“So, Chosen One. Are you going to win?”

“Well… yeah. I don’t have a choice, do I.” Harry stared at the lake, as if it might have answers. “You know, if Dumbledore has a grand plan to deal with you, we’re going to feel pretty stupid.”

“If Dumbledore has a grand plan to deal with me, I might as well jump into the lake and pick a fight with the giant squid. He probably does. My life is awful.”

“…could be worse,” Harry said dryly.

“Could be yours, oh famous and popular one.”

“But I was guessing about what the grand evil plan was. It’s killing someone, I think, if the necklace was any clue. So… as for who he’d want to kill….”

Oh.

“…is he trying to murder you in a plausibly deniable way?”

“Quite possibly.”

“Oh.”

Well. That was terrible.

“He said he had faith in me, Harry. That everyone else would doubt me, but that he knew I could do it.”

“…he has a way of making you feel special, yeah. He makes everyone feel like they’re his most special friend, right up until he’s putting them in the ground.”

“Mm.”
“Maybe Dumbledore’s grand plan is to dodge?”

Draco snickered.

“But you, you have a plan you haven’t told Professor Snape, a plan that isn’t stupid. One you can activate if you feel you have to, something that’s taking longer than you thought. You haven’t told Professor Snape because you don’t trust him… do you know what he vowed?”

“To protect me, to help me. I asked mother. The problem is….”

“Protecting you and helping you are two different things, aren’t they.”

“Under the circumstances. Yes. And Professor Snape ending up dead is... unacceptable.”


“Thanks, Harry,” Draco drawled, and shifted into a little cat.

“See you at DA.”

The cat flicked its tail at him, and trotted away down the tower stairs.
Hermione thought that since she and Harry had had no luck getting any information out of Professor Snape, Draco should give it a try. He should be more confident in his Occlumency, and go for it.

It had sounded so reasonable when she’d said it. Draco, personally, would rather go bathing with sharks than confront an adult Death Eater in his lair, but he’d said he’d try it their way. So he’d try it. There was, at least, an Unbreakable Vow in place to keep Professor Snape from attacking him.

He shifted cat for the walk up to Professor Snape’s office, because stray thoughts didn’t bounce around his head that much this way. He was going to go see the man who sometimes had fish. Maybe he would have fish.

Draco nosed the door open and padded inside the office. The fire was lit and warm, diverting Draco from his planned outing to sit by it and bask. He was cold, lately.

“Mister Malfoy,” Professor Snape said. “This is not your common room.”

Draco decided to ignore this and lie down on the hearth. The warmth had seeped into the surface beneath him. It was wonderful.

There was a ceramic click. Draco flicked an ear, and opened one eye.

It was a small saucer of sardines.

Best professor. Draco ate quickly and neatly, and licked his lips for a moment, before padding away from the fire and shifting.

“You are overindulging your feline instincts,” Professor Snape said mildly.

Draco sank into his most lazy, arrogant persona, and shrugged.

“I haven’t had a problem so far, professor.”

“Be that as it may. Did you have a question for me?”

“A few. You said you’d help, and mother said I should ask you for help. I still don’t think I need it.”

“You are arrogant. Very well. Tell me your plans.”

“I’m not worried about my plan. I’m worried about you. I want to know what your orders are. I don’t want us running into each other in the dark.”

Professor Snape’s eyes narrowed. It was very uncomfortable not being on Professor Snape’s good side, truly it was.

“Sit down.”

Draco sat in the chair, obedience a habit.

“I have no orders regarding your mission. I have promised to protect you, assist you, and if necessary, complete the mission so that you will not be punished for failure.”

“You think it will be necessary,” Draco said, trying not to bristle and failing. “You think I’m weak.”
“You are an amateur, making amateur mistakes. As I told you. If you expect to succeed, you will rely on those older and wiser than you.”

“*He* thinks I can do it. He has faith in me. You think I’ll fail him.” Draco allowed his eyes to narrow. “You don’t know me very well.”

Snape snorted.

“You are many years too young to intimidate me. My priority is the completion of his designs.”

“Then why did he ask me to watch you?” Draco asked abruptly, forgetting his own script.

Professor Snape smiled thinly.

“I have been asked to keep an eye on you as well. It is a standard practice of his to keep us focused.”

Draco found that all too plausible.

“I have another question, professor.”

“Ask.”

“What do you think of the headmaster?”

Professor Snape studied him through lidded eyes.

“He is a trusting fool, and a dangerous opponent.”

“Do you think he suspects anything?”

“Professor Dumbledore is seldom at Hogwarts and so has had few opportunities to notice anything amiss. Still, it does not do to underestimate him.”

There was something about that… Draco would think about it later.

“…I spoke harshly to you the night of Professor Slughorn’s Christmas party.”

“No, professor,” and here Draco was on firmer ground, “It was I who should apologize. I was careless that night. I usually do have backup and an alibi, I’m not *a complete* idiot. I’m not going to stab myself with my own wand, sir.”

“I would feel more comfortable if you shared more details of these friends of yours.”

“I have reasonable confidence in the occlumency Aunt Bella’s been teaching me, sir. I don’t know about yours. Best not to trouble you.”

“You did not used to be so much trouble.”

“I used to be able to write my father for advice, sir. There’s been an adjustment period.”

“We will all have him back soon enough.”

“…yes, sir. And I will have grown up in the meantime. I don’t know if he’ll be pleased.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Well, you see, sir… speaking of glory as we did the other day… I’d very much prefer for him to be
remembered as my father, rather than me being remembered as his son. I think he holds the opposite view.”

Professor Snape rolled his eyes, which Draco appreciated. He’d been trying for a joke.

“‘When you are ready, come to me and we will discuss your plan. I’m certain there are aspects of it that are salvageable.’”

Draco stood, bowed shallowly, and left.

Once he was in the hallway, he had a series of thoughts: occluding that hard rather hurt. He had no idea why Harry trusted Professor Snape one drop. Professor Dumbledore was going to die.

Draco doubted Harry would be happy with any of those conclusions, but he was rather proud of himself. Rather good, for his first turn at spying.
Knowing what was wrong with Draco was actually far more stressful than not knowing what was wrong with Draco. Harry almost wished he had the mystery back. He could, he supposed, probably manage to get Draco arrested for what he’d done to Katie, but it seemed to Harry that throwing Draco in with dementors would not actually help anyone if Draco had turned over a new leaf and was going to really stop being awful. That’s what Dumbledore had done with Professor Snape, wasn’t it?

Harry was rather cross that he’d managed to tell adults about the whole situation and still be the one stuck dealing with it.

Harry was infected enough with Draco-style madness to contemplate the Order of the Stag, that let you join before seventeen and stood for goodness and justice and proper potion ingredient storage, before remembering with some relief that he wasn’t Draco and he didn’t have to think that way. He could think like Harry Potter, who thought adults were faintly useless and not entirely trustworthy when it came to things like remembering kids could do stuff and telling them things they had a right to know. He didn’t have to be a… a miniature Tom Riddle, surrounding himself with the fearful and the sadistic, because they thought he was powerful.

It could be simple. Draco was being ordered to kill someone. Draco didn’t want to kill them. Therefore, Draco was in trouble, and Harry helped people who were in trouble when they were right in front of his face, no matter what he promised Professor Snape.

Harry managed to keep this calm outlook for about a week, before Hermione spent an entire day crying. Even Ron was pulled away from Lavender Brown’s embrace to try to coax her into talking about whatever was wrong, but she wouldn’t, not to Ron or Harry or anyone.

Eventually, Sunday night, with the common room finally empty, she confided to Harry, “It’s just – I figured it out. Dumbledore’s plan. Oh, Harry.”

“You need to tell me.”

“No, I don’t, because. Because you’d act differently, and I think it’s a secret, a really big secret. I can’t – I can’t-“

She burst into tears again. Harry, who had already tried hugging her, sat helplessly.

“I think I know all the pieces now,” she said thickly. “So we can get it all… sorted out. According to plan. But oh, Harry.”

“You have to talk to someone,” Harry tried.

“No. Not about this. Not now. I’ll tell you… after. Later. I just worked it out – it’s like Professor Snape’s logic puzzle first year – wizards never do have any logic.”

She wiped her eyes furiously.

“Oh, I can’t believe-“

Harry waited eagerly to see if this would lead to a revelation, and was disappointed when she trailed off into silence again.
“I think….” She trailed off again. “I think I’ll have some things to say to the DA. And to Draco. Harry, I’m afraid I can’t think of anything you can help with.”

Harry sighed.

“I suppose I’ll just have more time for working on wolfsbane, then. Professor Snape said he’d supervise a first attempt.”

“Good. That’s good.”

Harry was going to find out whoever’s fault this was and kill them. (It was probably Voldemort somehow, so no change there.)

#

Hermione burst into tears in Defense Against the Dark Arts at their first class of the week.

“What is wrong with you, you fool girl?” snarled Snape.

“I hate you! You’re a terrible teacher and you grade everyone unfairly and, and-“

She continued crying. Harry jumped to his feet.

“Hermione needs to go to the hospital wing, sir. Sorry, sir.”

He and Ron grabbed Hermione and dragged her from the room even as Professor Snape was snarling out their point loss. Harry got detention. He did not care.

Professor Snape asked what was wrong with her at detention, to which Harry could only say, “I think it’s a girl thing, sir.”

This did not improve Professor Snape’s temper. Lavender didn’t like how much time Ron was spending with Hermione, but Ron completely failed to notice.

This was not good for Ron’s relationship with Lavender. Ron failed to notice.

#

The meeting with the DA went something like this, in between practicing further nonverbal casting and other dueling practice:

Hermione spun it as a theoretical exercise, though very few people were fooled when her theoretical problem was Death Eaters gaining access to Hogwarts and how to get all the students to their dorms – and who would stay and fight. Somehow it was agreed that they would split up by Houses. Which left Draco and Greg on their own team, which made Draco smile thinly. The others who said they weren’t hiding, not ever, were predictable: Susan Bones, Hannah Abbott, Neville Longbottom, and others who had lost relatives or parents in this war or the last. Others were delegated to guarding the dormitories, Luna and Ginny among them. Harry didn’t mind that the younger students were all assigned guard duty.

It was all probably useless, but Harry and Hermione (and Ron, now that he was paying attention and realizing there was a problem) were all feeling particularly useless. The only things they could really do was practice their magic and speculate about the war. Hermione threw herself back into research about Horcruxes, and threw Harry back into the problem of Professor Slughorn, with a fierce gleam in her eye that told Harry he did not have a choice in the matter. Ron, meanwhile, was functionally
the Quidditch captain, though Harry called tactics sometimes, and Harry found that giving Ron more chances to think through plays as if they were chess matches really helped him settle down on the field.

Harry’s first attempt at Wolfsbane melted his cauldron and half his hand. Harry spent half a week in the hospital wing and pretended he’d fallen off a broomstick.

#

“Harry,” Hermione said abruptly as they walked to Herbology a few days later, “Dumbledore’s the secret keeper for Sirius’ house, right?”

“Yes….”

“Yes.”

She made a note on a list written in some sort of terrifying code, and moved away. Harry watched her go warily.

#

Ron never did need to be prevented from declaring his undying love of Romilda Vane. Draco never became desperate enough to try to poison Dumbledore through a bottle of mead. But Hagrid still overheard Snape and Dumbledore talking, and Snape saying he didn’t want to follow through on a task, and he told Ron, Hermione, and Harry.

More than anything this puzzled Ron and Harry, who still didn’t have the whole picture. For Hermione, who had more of the picture than anyone else, it was horrifying.
What They Say About Unicorns

Harry’s second attempt at Wolfsbane, once more tucked away in a quiet unused Potions lab Professor Snape had directed him to, didn’t melt anything. However, after a month’s effort, Professor Snape inspected the steaming black liquid closely and said, “You’ve successfully managed to kill your werewolf, Potter. Congratulations.”

Harry was very tempted to throw something.

“I don’t have a use for a caustic poison. Do you, Professor?”

“If I did, I would make my own.”

“Right,” Harry said glumly.

“Many potion masters do not come so close as you have come, Potter. Cease your moping.”

“I’m not moping about that.”

Much.

“Then what, pray tell, is the problem.”

“Hermione won’t tell me.”

“Then it’s a boy.”

“She and Ron are in love and won’t admit it and he’s dating Lavender,” Harry said impatiently. “No, it’s not that.”

“You are being obscure,” Professor Snape said, moving around through post-potions failure cleanup.

“Yep.”

“If this is because I asked you to leave Order business well enough alone, I do not appreciate it.”

“Yeah… I failed miserably at that. I’m nosy.”

“Of that, I am aware.”

“Sirius met a girl,” Harry said, in a blatant attempt to change the subject. “She’s a muggle and she thinks he’s dashing, apparently.”

“Why would you ever think I wished to know that.”

“So you could deplore him,” Harry said happily. “I know it’s a sad day for you when you can’t deplore him.”

“Despise. The word is despise.”

“That, too.”

After which they fell into quite predictable bickering. It was comfortable, familiar, and didn’t really get them any closer to bridging the gap that had been caused by the Department of Mysteries the previous year.
Harry managed to avoid the hospital wing after the game against Hufflepuff. Luna commentated, and Greg got into a boatload of fights about her performance, which he maintained was grand.

Harry was not quite sure how they worked, but Greg was entirely devoted to the concept. And to the concept of the Rotfang conspiracy. Dean Thomas and Ginny were still dating, but Ron and Lavender Brown were not.

The problem with Horace Slughorn was that Horace Slughorn was not easy to manipulate, even if you were a born manipulator. Which Harry was not. And Harry was not naturally talented at being two places at once, either, and Horace Slughorn had a talent for avoiding a student he knew had a busy schedule.

So Professor Dumbledore only made Harry feel mildly guilty about failing to obtain the memory.

“What’s sectumsempra?” Harry asked, during what had become routine panicked moments to drop by the potions lab to stare at his third batch of wolfsbane. This time, he would get it right, because Professor Snape had said some unobtrusive snide things about the expense of the ingredients and Harry’s care for his work.

“A dark curse,” Professor Snape said, very mildly. “A cutting curse. It will not send you to Azkaban, but as its inventor, I must request you forget it exists.”

“Oh.”

Right. Professor Snape: still pretty evil.

Professor Snape would probably just terrify Professor Slughorn into giving up the memory, but Harry had never quite gotten the hang of being terrifying.

The blackness of Harry’s wolfsbane had been broken by blue specks halfway through its brewing, and just now the smoke from it had finally turned blue. Harry gestured Professor Snape forward from where he had been watching, perching like a crow at the back of the lab. Professor Snape hadn’t been helping this time, exactly, but he’d been hovering and yelling at Harry whenever Harry was going to ruin things. Which was often.

“…formalities aside, Harry,” Professor Snape said, “This is a master-work. I suggest you bottle it for your werewolf.”

“It won’t – it won’t kill him?”

“I cannot say I would care overmuch if it did, but no. It’s acceptable.”

Harry had the weird and terrifying impulse to hug his teacher. He resisted it.

“A master-work?”

“Your apprenticeship is not over, because I have higher standards than this. You have yet to create a fully original potion. Still, your basic skills are… nothing to be ashamed of.”

“It’d kill you to give me a straight compliment, wouldn’t it.”
“Most likely.”

#

In another universe, Draco confided in Moaning Myrtle. In this universe he did too, because some things you don’t share with enemies, or even allies – crying, being bullied, weakness.

Hermione was going a bit mad trying to get Harry and Ron to perfect apparition. Harry, who did not really have time, was happy to point out that he was too young anyway. Ron, however, took it more to heart, though he confided to Harry it was more to avoid Hermione crying again than anything else.

Harry was pleasantly distracted by the sight of two cats, one white and tiny, one tabby, sitting by the edge of the lake, staring at rocks. One set of rocks turned easily between colors, and the other cat’s set – Draco’s set – slowly turned purple over the course of half an hour.

Draco, Harry thought, was getting pretty scary. Harry was quite glad they were on the same side now.

#

Aragog died, and Ron and Hermione gave Harry the idea to use Felix Felicis to deal with Professor Slughorn.

Harry didn’t tell them he’d been saving it because he had a horrible feeling that Professor Snape would require him to make his own next time he wanted some, and Harry was having a hard time putting up with Professor Snape this year. Professor Snape was much less fun as a Defense teacher than he’d been as a Potions teacher.

#

Harry drank a few hours of Felix Felicis. Among other things, he got Ron and Lavender, Ginny and Dean Thomas to break up, got a memory from Slughorn, and this:

“You are being weak,” Professor Snape hissed to Draco in a side corridor.

Draco and Professor Snape were glaring at each other again. Harry, invisible, paused to put a comforting hand on Draco’s shoulder, before moving on with his errand.

Behind him, Draco straightened his shoulders.

“I know, sir. I’m not a very strong person. But I’m doing my best for you, sir, I really am.”

“For me.”

“Yes, sir. I don’t want to give you more work to do, so I’m going to take care of it. It’s just… tricky.”

“How so?”

“Timing. Intent.”

Professor Snape’s eyes were shadowed.

“You are still a child. No one will be pleased if you ruin yourself over this, Draco.”

“Thanks for saying that, sir. Excuse me.”
The memory of Slughorn’s, of course, led to a discussion of Horcruxes.

“I believe, Harry, that the locket Sirius Black destroyed, to his peril, was also a Horcrux, though I do not believe Voldemort is yet aware of its destruction, or his wrath would be great. This is part of why I have kept Sirius away from the Wizarding world, for I believe he is in the most danger of any of my agents, should he come into contact with the Death Eaters. They seek him fiercely.”

Harry, if he was being honest with himself, thought that love and being pure of heart was a crap superpower. He’d much rather be able to fly. It was better than no superpower at all, but he thought it a little strange that so few wizards could say that they were pure of heart.

Ron, who he was confiding in because Hermione was chained to the library these days when she wasn’t practicing spells, laughed at him.

“Ron,” Harry protested. “I’m being serious.”

“It’s just – that’s what people say about unicorns,” Ron said, and laughed at him some more.

Ron’s impulse to whinny at him over the next few days was not appreciated.

It was made worse by Ron cornering him during a free period and asking him, “So, about Ginny.”

“Professor Snape says I can’t date and have a potions apprenticeship at the same time,” Harry said, trying to keep his voice flat and not wistful.

Ron looked faintly relieved, and then whinnied.
“Can you check this?” Greg asked Harry, one evening in the library.

Harry accepted the piece of paper with some trepidation – Greg had been odd all year, alternatively sticking as usual to Luna’s side and disappearing for hours with Draco.

_Dear mother,_

_Thank you for your letter disowning me at my emancipation hearing. I am proposing on Saturday and have got permission from Professor Snape for you to witness it. I have permission from her father._

_Yours sincerely,_

_Gregory_

Harry looked up at Greg.

“How long have you been working on this?”

“Couple months.”

“It’s very… grammatical.”

Greg looked rather worried.

“That means it’s good. She disowned you?”

Greg nodded.

“But you want her to meet Luna.”

Greg shrugged.

“…I’d like to be there. To, um, witness. The happy occasion.”

And join in any fights to the death.

Greg grinned.

“Sure.”

“What about, er, your father? Should you put in anything about him?”

“I wasn’t sure.”

“Is he… wanted by the Ministry?”

“Not yet.”

“Right.”

“I’ll put in a bit about him,” Greg decided.
Shortly, Harry had the letter to read again.

*PS. Father is invited too, if he is not busy and there are no open arrest warrants for him.*

Well, Harry thought faintly. This should be exciting.

#

By complete coincidence, the entire DA gathered in a loose circle in the great hall as lunchtime came to an end on Saturday, playing a game of battering balls back and forth with their wands wordlessly, when Professor Snape escorted Mr. and Mrs. Goyle into the room. The staff table seemed oddly full as well, and Professor McGonagall in particular was watching the proceedings like a cat at a mousehole.

The DA ceased their game, and loitered. Pointedly. Harry, who felt he might ruin the moment by being obtrusive, was under his invisibility cloak.

Luna, the only person in the entire DA who *didn’t* know what was going on, blinked dreamily at the room.

Greg knelt in front of her.

The rest of the school craned to watch the drama.

“Luna, would you marry me, please? It would be….“ Greg checked a piece of paper in his hand.

“My great honor and privation-“

“Privilege,” Draco hissed from where he was sitting a few feet away.

“Privilege,” Greg plowed on, “If you would be my wife, forever. Because you are,” he checked his notes, “The most beautiful and clever girl I’ve ever met, and to defeat the Rotfang conspiracy together.”

Harry put the hand he didn’t have holding his wand over his mouth, to avoid making any noise and ruining the, er, moment.

“If you say yes, you get this ring,” Greg concluded, offering Luna a silver ring set with an emerald.

“And I’ll make sure no one ever steals it.”

Harry, who had seen Draco laboring over something silver and green at odd moments over the past week, had a strong suspicion who had transfigured that particular object into its current shape.

“I think that would be very nice,” Luna agreed, and slipped the ring on. “But you look very uncomfortable, so you should get up.”

Greg lumbered to his feet, beaming.

“Your name, girl,” barked Mr. Goyle, largely forgotten – which was a trick and a half, given the size of Mr. Goyle.

“This is Luna Lovegood,” Greg said.

Mrs. Goyle whispered in Mr. Goyle’s ear. Harry raised his wand, just in case hexing was needed.

Mr. Goyle made a hmphing noise, and turned and left. Harry let out a slow breath.
Mrs. Goyle lingered to talk to the happy couple, but Harry figured anyone could watch them. He followed Mr. Goyle and Professor Snape.

“Dark Lord’s getting impatient,” Mr. Goyle said to Snape.

“Not here, you fool,” Snape hissed. “And he has never been known for his patience, in any case.”

“Your neck.”

“So it is. If he asks… tell him he would be impressed with Draco’s attitude.”

For the next week, Luna wore turnip earrings that matched her new emerald ring, and a necklace of green-and-white fishing bobbles.

Moaning Myrtle popped out of a wall in front of Harry as he was walking down to dinner alone one day.

“Harry! Harry, he says he’ll only talk to you. Is it true you kiss sometimes?”

Her expression was avid. Harry closed his eyes and counted to ten.

“I’ve never kissed Draco,” he said, “Where is he?”

Myrtle tilted her head at him, silent and smiling oddly.

“We’ve gone up to the Astronomy Tower a few times,” Harry muttered, “Now where is he?”

“Oh, you must tell me next time so I can watch!”

She twirled upside down, and led the way to a boy’s bathroom a few floors away, chattering about pretty boys and sensitivity and I read a comic book like this once.

Draco was standing at the sink, staring at his hands, which were white-knuckled clutching the porcelain.

"Myrtle,” Harry said, "Can you give us a few minutes?"

"Aw."

"Privacy, Myrtle?"

She withdrew through the floor, pouting.

“Draco?” Harry asked, casting a few anti-eavesdropper spells.

“I can’t do it. Everyone’s counting on me, and I can’t do it. I thought – but it’s not working. You’re right, I’m completely useless.”

“Hey,” Harry said sharply. “None of that. I mean, I don’t know what you’re working on, but… come on. You’re almost as clever as Hermione, aren’t you? And you’ve got her to ask if you have to.”

“He’s going to kill me if I fail, and I’m failing. I’m running out of time, Harry.”
Harry leaned against the sink and studied Draco’s pale, drawn face, with signs of sleep deprivation and tears.

He dug in his pocket.

“Chocolate?”

Draco hissed at him.

“They’re just chocolates. I figured someday I’d want to give someone some candy without drugging them. Today seems to be the day.”

Draco accepted one gingerly, ate it, and copied Harry’s carefully casual posture, leaning against the side of a bathroom stall.

“What you’re missing,” Harry said thoughtfully, “Is you can trust people outside your family to care about you. I’m your friend. Professor Snape wants to look after you. We’re not going to let you get killed, alright? I’ll go ahead with Plan A and kidnap you and lock you in a closet until the war’s over if I have to.”

Draco looked rather wistful.

“And you don’t trust the Order, but they’d help you, too,” Harry plowed on. “Even Dumbledore. You’re… can I be blunt?”

“You weren’t already?” Draco said, with a choked laugh. Draco rubbed at his eyes. Harry supposed they were itchy, what with all that not-crying Draco was doing.

“You’re not a fighter. I mean, you’re a bit of a bully, but you don’t like fighting. No one should be recruiting you for a war, except as a healer or a… a builder of fortifications.”

“We don’t get what we want.”

“Well, what I want is for you not to die, and I’m going to get it. With my… how’d I put it before?”


“Right, with those. Ron reckons I’m a unicorn.”

“Does he,” Draco murmured.

“Whinnies at me in the halls.”

“…you’re just trying to cheer me up.”

“Yep. So?”

“I think I can manage a nice ambulatory unicorn to follow you around for a week by dinnertime,” Draco mused.

Harry grinned.

“I’m going to hex you in the face, Malfoy.”

“As if, Potter.”
Draco enchanted a handsome statue of a unicorn to follow Harry around and whicker at inconvenient moments. Ron high-fived him, which made Draco and Ron stare at each other and then look away at the same time. If Harry had to guess, he’d guess they’d decided to pretend it never happened.
Draco Tries To Do The Right Thing

The team won the match and the Quidditch cup, but Harry did not kiss Ginny at the end of it, at least in part because a large white stone unicorn knocked him over in the middle of the moment.

#

“I want to talk to you, Harry,” Hermione said, dropping into a seat next to him in the common room. Harry eyed her.

“I think we should be recruiting. Professor McGonagall would be a good choice.”

“She’ll kill us,” Harry pointed out. “For getting involved in things when we should be studying.”

“I don’t care.”

Harry shoved his glasses up his nose, and tried to figure out if Hermione was still sane. Her expression told him nothing except that she was fierce, which he already knew.

“She won’t go against Dumbledore,” Harry settled on. “Not for me, not for anyone.”

“Can you think of anyone in the Order who would?”

“…Sirius, I suppose. If I asked.”

“Then we start with him, this summer,” Hermione said firmly.

Harry eyed her, and tried to decide if he wanted to wrestle the truth out of her.

“I’ve got to get back to the library,” she declared, and stood again.

Hermione, Harry decided, was a very frustrating leader to have. Slightly less frustrating than Dumbledore, though. At least she told him where she was going when she vanished.

#

Professor Trelawney tried to hide her whiskey in the Room of Requirement, and Harry asked her about it.

While he had not been stalking Draco so closely this year, he nonetheless made the connection between a mysteriously happy person hiding in the Room of Requirements with Draco, who tended to keep obsessive track of the DA schedule and would, if found coming along the 7th floor corridor, say he’d been doing ‘extra DA practice with Greg.’

He couldn’t resist the opportunity to see what Dumbledore would say to a teacher reporting Draco was up to something. Call him nosy, call him overprotective, call him whatever you want.

"... but then we were rudely interrupted by Severus Snape!"

The words echoed in his head, over and over. Severus Snape overheard the prophecy.

Severus Snape told Voldemort.
The whole world was topsy-turvy, and nothing made sense.

How could he. How could he.

Professor Dumbledore’s words about why Professor Snape had done it didn’t matter, not really, because it was Snape Harry wanted to talk to, him Harry wanted to – to say something that would make it better. And Harry didn’t think that would ever happen. So Harry heard the explanation, shrugged, and didn’t try to tell Dumbledore to do something about Snape and Draco. Hermione said Harry’s job was horcruxes. Harry’s job was horcruxes.

Harry had just a few minutes to tell Hermione, “He’s done it, whatever it is. Draco. So you need to work out the timing on how this isn’t going to work out awfully, now, because it’s happening.”

He left her there, looking pale as a ghost, and raced to follow Dumbledore.

Harry was successfully distracted by the possibility of a Horcrux, though Harry would never forgive himself that it was just the other end of the puzzle that led to the locket in Sirius’ house. And then he was back at Hogsmeade, and no longer distracted.

Professor Snape had warned him, hadn’t he, years ago, that it would be the last thing Harry’s parents would want, for Harry to look up to him, for Harry to see him as – as – that it would be a betrayal of their memories. That Harry had betrayed their memories.

He’d warned Harry, and Harry had kept blithely on, like an idiot. Like a child.

It was time, Harry thought grimly, to grow up.

Professor Dumbledore wanted Snape? Well, Harry wanted to talk to him too.

Then they saw the Dark Mark above the school, and Harry had a vivid, distracting flashback of last summer at Privet Drive.

This time, he wasn’t running away.

#

“You swore to obey me, Harry--go!”

Harry hurried over to the door leading to the spiral staircase, but his hand had only just closed upon the iron ring of the door when he heard running footsteps on the other side. He looked round at Dumbledore, who gestured to him to retreat. Harry backed away, drawing his wand as he did so.

The door burst open and somebody erupted through it and shouted: "Expelliarmus!"

Harry's body became instantly rigid and immobile, and he felt himself fall back against the Tower wall, propped like an unsteady statue, unable to move or speak. He could not understand how it had happened--Expelliarmus was not a Freezing Charm—

Then, by the light of the Mark, he saw Dumbledore's wand flying in an arc over the edge of the ramparts and understood ... Dumbledore had wordlessly immobilised Harry, and the second he had taken to perform the spell had cost him the chance of defending himself.

Standing against the ramparts, very white in the face, Dumbledore still showed no sign of panic or distress. He merely looked across at his disarmer and said, “Good evening, Draco.”

Draco stepped forwards, glancing around quickly to check that he and Dumbledore were alone. His
eyes fell upon the second broom.

"Who else is here?"

"A question I might ask you. Or are you acting alone?"

Harry saw Draco's pale eyes shift back to Dumbledore in the greenish glare of the Mark.

"No," he said. "I've got back-up. There are Death Eaters here in your school tonight."

"Well, well," said Dumbledore, as though Draco was showing him an ambitious homework project. "Very good indeed. You found a way to let them in, did you?"

“Yeah.” Draco’s breath was coming in gasps, his eyes wild. “But we won’t be interrupted, not yet. I’ve got time.”

"Well, then, you must get on and do it, my dear boy," said Dumbledore softly.

There was silence. Harry stood imprisoned within his own invisible, paralysed body, staring at the two of them, his ears straining to hear sounds of the Death Eaters' distant fight, and in front of him, Draco Malfoy did nothing but stare at Albus Dumbledore who, incredibly, smiled.

"Draco, Draco, you are not a killer."

Draco bared his teeth in a wordless snarl.

“Who cares what I am? I have a job to do. Someone – someone has to put you down. It should be me. I should have the glory, and the– the–”

“Forgive me, Draco, but your attempts to kill me so far this year have been quite feeble. I must wonder if your heart is in it.”

“Are you trying to provoke me?”

“No, Draco,” Dumbledore said very gently. “But you should, perhaps, get on with it. What if your accomplices are delayed? Indeed, I am curious how you managed to penetrate Hogwart’s defenses.”

“I’m not narrating my plan for Potter, Professor,” Draco said with a wild laugh. “I’m not stupid, no matter what you all think. Is he watching? Or has he gone downstairs to try to rescue all the innocent students?”

“We’re alone, Draco,” Dumbledore said very gently.

“You know what my problem is?” Draco said aloud, wand steady on Dumbledore’s heart. “My problem is I hate you. I didn’t at the beginning of this year, but the more I got to know you in order to figure out what to do to kill you, the more I hated you. I try to clear my mind for the spell, and all I can think is I want you to suffer. So I have a question, before I do this. Why didn’t you stop me? I’m not naïve enough to think you didn’t know about it.”

_Dumbledore slid a little down the ramparts, the strength in his legs apparently fading, and Harry struggled fruitlessly, mutely, against the enchantment binding him._

"As a matter of fact, I did," said Dumbledore. "I was sure it was you."

"Why didn't you stop me, then?" Malfoy demanded.
"I tried, Draco. Professor Snape has been keeping watch over you on my orders--"

"Avada kedavra," Draco said, expression twisted with hate.

Nothing happened.

Draco snarled again, silent and wordless. Harry remembered a whisper of a lecture – a spell performed with dispassion and focused intent.

"Bloody- I can do this."

"You do not have to," Dumbledore said, very gently.

"I want to. I want to."

Dumbledore asked a few questions, then, about Draco’s plans, and Draco answered distractedly. Harry could do nothing.

"We decided to put the Dark Mark over the Tower and get you to hurry up here, to see who'd been killed," said Malfoy. "And it worked!"

"Well ... yes and no ..." said Dumbledore. "But am I to take it, then, that nobody has been murdered?"

"I am trying to focus."

"Yes, I can see that you are. What have I done to so offend you?"

"Something you haven’t figured out, in your vaunted wisdom? Die curious."

But Draco still did not try to cast the spell again.

"There is little time, one way or another," said Dumbledore. "So let us discuss your options, Draco."

"My options!" said Malfoy loudly. "I'm standing here with a wand--I'm about to kill you--"

"My dear boy, let us have no more pretence about that. If you were going to kill me, you would have done it when you first Disarmed me, you would not have stopped for this pleasant chat about ways and means."

"I haven't got any options!" said Malfoy, and he was suddenly as white as Dumbledore. "I've got to do it! He'll kill me! He'll kill my whole family!"

"I appreciate the difficulty of your position," said Dumbledore. "Why else do you think I have not confronted you before now? Because I knew that you would have been murdered if Lord Voldemort realised that I suspected you."

Malfoy winced at the sound of the name.

"I did not dare speak to you of the mission with which I knew you had been entrusted, in case he used Legilimency against you," continued Dumbledore. "But now at last we can speak plainly to each other ... no harm has been done, you have hurt nobody, though you are very lucky that your unintentional victim survived ... I can help you, Draco."

"I know which side I’m on. I know what I have to do."
"Come over to the right side, Draco, and we can hide you more completely than you can possibly imagine. What is more, I can send members of the Order to your mother tonight to hide her likewise. Your father is safe at the moment in Azkaban ... when the time comes we can protect him too ... come over to the right side, Draco ... you are not a killer ..."

Malfoy stared at Dumbledore.

“I’ve had that offer before, Professor,” Draco said conversationally. “Harry offered to hide me in his closet until the war was over. I’ll fight, thanks. I’m not a coward, no matter what anyone else thinks.”

Something in Dumbledore’s eyes sharpened.

“Harry said that, did he. I regret very much that I did not take the time before now to discussion your situation in more detail with Harry.”

“Worry about your own situation, old man.”
"Draco, do it, or stand aside so one of us--" screeched the woman, but at that precise moment the door to the ramparts burst open once more and there stood Snape, his wand clutched in his hand as his black eyes swept the scene, from Dumbledore slumped against the wall, to the four Death Eaters, including the enraged werewolf, and Malfoy.

"We've got a problem, Snape," said the lumpy Amycus, whose eyes and wand were fixed alike upon Dumbledore, "the boy doesn't seem able--"

But somebody else had spoken Snape's name, quite softly.

"Severus ..."

The sound frightened Harry beyond anything he had experienced all evening. For the first time, Dumbledore was pleading.

Snape said nothing, but walked forwards and pushed Malfoy roughly out of the way. The three Death Eaters fell back without a word. Even the werewolf seemed cowed.

Snape gazed for a moment at Dumbledore, and there was revulsion and hatred etched in the harsh lines of his face.

"Severus ... please ..."

Snape raised his wand and pointed it directly at Dumbledore.

"Avada Kedavra!"

A jet of green light shot from the end of Snape's wand and hit Dumbledore squarely in the chest. Harry's scream of horror never left him; silent and unmoving, he was forced to watch as Dumbledore was blasted into the air: for a split second he seemed to hang suspended beneath the shining skull, and then he fell slowly backwards, like a great rag doll, over the battlements and out of sight.

Professor Snape had Draco, and Draco was frozen like a rabbit in his grip, it seemed. Harry couldn’t seem to think, but he kept moving, kept fighting, because terror and horror could wait but the fight could not, not with Ginny and Hermione and everyone in danger.

Harry was trying to think, and he couldn’t help but think – Draco hadn’t done it. Could he let Draco be dragged off into a nest of Death Eaters, when Draco had betrayed them at the critical moment? He tried to think of Professor Snape as just another faceless Death Eater, and failed.

This is the man who betrayed your mother to her death, he told himself fiercely. Grow up. Grow up! Curse him into the ground now and worry about it later!

Mustering all his powers of concentration, Harry thought, Levi--

"No, Potter!" screamed Snape. There was a loud BANG and Harry was soaring backward, hitting the ground hard again, and this time his wand flew out of his hand. He could hear Hagrid yelling and Fang howling as Snape closed in and looked down on him where he lay, wandless and
defenseless as Dumbledore had been. Snape's pale face, illuminated by the flaming cabin, was suffused with darkness just as it had been before he had cursed Dumbledore.

“I don’t think I’ll ever forgive you for this,” Harry said conversationally, before lunging for his wand. It was blown out of his reach.

“Stay down, idiot,” Snape said, something awful in his tone. “If you want to live.”

“Run away. If you want to live.”

This delightful conversation was interrupted by a very angry hippogriff.

And then Harry had Hagrid to deal with, and the body, and Harry was crying too much to think.

Sirius would help him get revenge. Sirius had been right the whole time, right to worry, right to threaten, right to be watchful. Sirius understood about revenge, they could hunt down Snape and Pettigrew together….

Something about it didn’t feel right, but probably that was Harry’s heart breaking into a thousand tiny pieces.

He did not want to leave Dumbledore's side, he did not want to move anywhere. Hagrid's hand on his shoulder was trembling. Then another voice said, "Harry, come on."

It was Hermione. She took his hand, and led him away. He went, numbly.

“'This was your best plan,' he whispered. ‘This?'”

She swallowed, and said, “I need you to focus now, Harry. We need a leader.”

“A leader. You let me – I had to watch-“

“Harry-”

“Because I’m not a good enough actor?” he snarled in a vicious whisper.

“I’m sorry,” she said, and she was crying. He hugged her, because she was Hermione and she was crying. “I can’t do this, Harry, I don’t know what to do, I haven’t known what to do for months.”

“Right,” he said numbly.

“We need to go to the Hospital Wing. Bill’s hurt.”

So that was what they did.

"And Dumbledore believed that?” said Lupin incredulously. "Dumbledore believed Snape was sorry James was dead? Snape hated James..."

And Harry was silent. Because, he realized, he wasn’t a good actor. He didn’t know his lines in this play. He just wanted to join in Fawkes’ song and never have to think about Snape again. The conversation flowed on without him. Hermione, too, was silent, Harry saw, pale and tearful. Ron was holding her hand.
Harry was pulled out of his haze for only one comment.

“Sirius would want you two to go for it,” he said. “I’ll set him on your tail, Remus, if you don’t.”

Remus laughed rustily.

Harry went back to thinking about the soar and dive of Quidditch.

#

There were a few Death Eaters all over the school the next morning, trapped in artificial swamps, turned into canaries, bound in Devil’s Snare vines, ready to be shipping off to Azkaban. Hermione explained tearfully to the aurors that the students had been worried about school security, and had made it something of a group project, but they never expected….

Then she burst into tears. Harry rather wanted to join her.

#

Harry, Ron, and Hermione met for a council of war in the Room of Requirement, before the funeral.

“I can see why Draco was so angry with Dumbledore,” Harry said, staring at the crackling fire. The room looked very much like the Gryffindor Common Room today. “I hate this plan.”

“What’re you on about?” asked Ron.

Hermione explained.

Ron said nothing for a while. None of them did.

“We’ve still got to deal with the Horcruxes, and Voldemort,” Harry said. “But I reckon we should have our own side, and our own plan.”

“What about the Slytherins?” asked Ron. Naming no names.

“Hex them into the ground and then lock them in a closet,” Harry said. “I’m tired of leaving people to sort themselves out, too.”

“So… they’re both on our side,” Ron said. “But neither of them know for sure the other one’s on our side.”

Harry grunted.

“S’ppose it means if You-Know-Who catches one of them, he won’t get the other,” Ron muttered morosely.

And then there was the funeral.

Sirius sat next to Harry, expression very black, and Harry realized he wouldn’t be able to explain Snape to Sirius. Not really, not ever again.

Harry wasn’t even sure he could explain Snape to himself.
Draco had taken his turn to report first, and then the rest had filled in the gap. Draco, who was busy trying not to gibber in terror, was rather distracted from their various speeches about this spell cast or that route guarded. Professor Snape went last, dour to the end, and Draco swallowed guilt down into the depths of his mind and strangled it there.

Dumbledore was dead. He’d hated Dumbledore. Sometimes, you had a good day.

They were in Draco’s home, Malfoy Manor. It didn’t feel like home. It felt strange. He’d failed his master today, not quite able to manage the killing blow. Still, the Dark Lord seemed entirely pleased, almost purring. Draco resisted the urge to shift cat. That was not included in the etiquette of the moment.

“Lord Voldemort is pleased. Go, there is more work to do. Severus, Draco, remain.”

The group scattered, and Draco swallowed, nervous. Once they were alone, the Dark Lord stirred in his chair, long pale fingers rising from the armrest and beckoning Professor Snape forward.

Snape knelt at his feet.

“Tell me, Severus. You truly struck the killing blow?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“You see? All is possible if you trust in Lord Voldemort. Did you think we would be here again, a year ago?”

“No, my lord. I thought I would die a year ago.”

“And yet how good a decision it was to spare you, my favorite traitor.”

Draco’s thoughts stalled to a halt.

“I am grateful, master, for your mercy.”

Lord Voldemort smiled. Draco fought not to cringe.

“You are right to be grateful. I have another task for you, Severus, but first, you must have a reward. What is your wish?”

“Hogwarts, my lord. I wish to be headmaster, when we take the school.”

“Amusing. Shall I give you the choice of teachers, as well?”

“…at your pleasure, my lord.”

“The time will come when I will believe you again, Severus. Keep working towards that day.”

Snape inclined his head.

“Draco, child.”

Draco stepped forward, fighting nerves.
“I am very pleased with you, and I have for you a task that should be less taxing to the nerves.”

Draco flinched, and then wasn’t sure why he had. He was just jumpy, he supposed.

“Still, given sufficient motivation, you rose to the occasion. As I knew you would. Your next task is to watch over Severus, here. He has certain weaknesses that the Order has shamefully taken advantage of, and we would not want him to… falter.”

“…I don’t think I can fight Professor Snape and win, my lord.”

Voldemort laughed, high and eerie, and Draco fist ed his robes in his hands.

“Simply watch, Draco. Should he falter, you shall report it to me, and I… what will I do, Severus?”

“Use your opponent’s weakness against them,” Snape recited.

“Yes. In this case, his students. Starting with you, Draco, so it would be in your best interest to convince him that he must remember his place.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“This is a confidential assignment. Do you understand?”

“Yes, my lord. I understand.”

Tell anyone and die horribly.

“Now, Severus. Tell me, what were the final moments like? Did you enjoy it, in the end?”

“I always enjoy the kill, master. He said… he said.”

Draco had wondered how Professor Snape had been managing to stay so calm.

“Yes, Severus?”

“He said, ‘Severus, please.’”

Lord Voldemort laughed. For a long time.

“Now, as for the promise you will make me, in exchange for Hogwarts and your students continued safety….” Voldemort’s red eyes met Draco’s. “You are dismissed, Draco.”

Draco bowed as low as he could, and fled.

“Draco!” cried a wonderful, familiar voice, and Draco was swept up in an embrace.

“Hello, mother.”

“You’ve grown.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“Yes, I’ve heard. I’m very proud of you.”

“Mm.”

“You look so tired. Come along.”
For a few hours, Draco decided, he could let his mother take care of things.

#

After a being a cat for a while, with a bowl of fresh cream and some chicken, and curling up in his mother’s lap to purr throatily and Not Think, Draco was having a much better night.

“Narcissa.”

“Hello, Severus,” his mother said warmly. “I’d get up, but-“

“He is tired, I expect.”

“Thank you.”

“Has he told you of his next assignment?”

“Oh. No, I had hoped… what does our lord wish?”

“I am to tutor Draco, and he is to assist me. In due time, I expect to be appointed headmaster of Hogwarts, and I will need an able deputy among the students to keep order during the transition.”

“That… that sounds wonderful, Severus. You’ll look after him?”

“I will do my best.”

Draco decided he was done being quiet. He hopped down from his mother’s lap and shifted human, adjusting his robes.

“May I show you to one of the guest rooms, sir?”

“Certainly, Draco.”

“Good night, Mother.”

Draco got a hug, which he endured without rolling his eyes.

They strolled together up a flight of stairs and into one of the guest rooms.

“So, I’m to keep an eye on you,” Draco said. “Make sure you’re doing as is best.”

“Apparently so,” Snape said, dead dry.

Draco thought about a moment a month ago, when he’d looked at Professor Snape and thought perhaps he could trust him.

“I suppose I should mention, sir, that I defected to the – how did he put it – the ‘right’ side six months ago. I’ve been working with Harry Potter. If you’d like to turn me in, now would be the time.”

Professor Snape swiveled on his heels to stare at him. Draco stared back, too tired to be scared. Perhaps he was brave after all.

“If you don’t believe me, sir, you can use legimency.”

Professor Snape laughed rustily.
“Sir?”

“Harry Potter is going to be the death of me. Very well. I will take you up on that offer of legimency. Make it convincing, Draco.”

Draco let his occlumency barriers fall, and met Professor Snape’s eyes. They fell into his mind, into memories of Harry, memories of the DA, even memories of Hermione and Greg.

Draco was standing in his parents’ guest room, blinking at his professor.

“Very well. We will not speak of this again. We will not think of it again. If it becomes necessary, I will do what is needful in a way that does not implicate you. And, yes… your first lessons, I think, will be in occlumency. You can improve there.”

“I’d thought… that is…”

“You have escaped detection so far, yes, but the Dark Lord is not stupid. Far from it. You must bury this so deep within your mind even you do not know it. Subtlety. In all things, subtlety. But now… go to sleep.”

“…I’m sorry I couldn’t… I didn’t want you to have to.”

Professor Snape eyed him for a silent moment.

“I should much rather I had done it than you, Draco. I have… worried about you. You have given me a measure of hope tonight.”

Draco nodded.

“Good night, sir.”

“Good night, Draco.”

Draco did not find it easy to sleep that night, but he thought – he hoped – he had done the right thing.
Moving felt much more bearable than sitting still: just as setting out as soon as possible to track down the Horcruxes and kill Voldemort would feel better than waiting to do it ...

"Harry!"

He turned. Rufus Scrimgeour was limping rapidly towards him around the bank, leaning on his walking stick.

"I've been hoping to have a word ... do you mind if I walk a little way with you?"

They had never met before, so Harry felt he had to be reasonably polite.

“Sure.”

“You’re a very well-guarded young man, you know.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Yes, indeed. I’ve been trying to secure a meeting since last summer – the things we could be doing together, you understand.”

“Oh.”

“You must be devastated, of course,” and there was some stuff about Harry’s relationship with Professor Dumbledore that made Harry want to punch someone, mostly.

And then the question of where he’d gone.

“Sorry,” Harry said. “I make a policy of not telling secrets to anyone I haven’t checked for polyjuice and so on. And then I make a policy of not telling secrets, Minister.”

“Such loyalty is admirable, but,” and the Minister said some more words. Harry should probably be paying attention. “-Aurors at your disposal.”

“I don’t need any aurors, I don’t think,” Harry said. “I can’t think of a use for them.”

“Your protection is one of the Ministry’s priorities, Harry.”

“I think you should be being, what’s that word, proactive. You seem like you’re spending all your time defending things. Send your aurors out to find some Death Eaters and lock them up, alright?”

The conversation went exceedingly well from there. Harry, who had learned to evade questions at the Severus Snape school of evading teachers, was vaguely bored.

#

Harry talked to Ron and Hermione for a few minutes before seeking out Sirius.

“Alright?” Harry asked.

“I should be asking you that.”

“I already know how I am.”
“I used a few dark curses, in my time, before James got onto me about it and I got my head on straight. Right now… right now I want to dust them off and go hunting for Snape’s hide.”

Harry shot him a sideways look.

“Doesn’t using dark magic lead to cackling and general….”

“Evil? Yes.”

“Don’t turn evil, Sirius. I’d have to lock you in a closet.”

“Hmph. C’mon, kiddo. Let’s go home.”

“…you want to come to Godric’s Hollow with me, sometime soon?” Harry asked, as they drifted off towards the departure line to say goodbye. Harry had one day more at Hogwarts with Ron and Hermione, first.
VII: Recruitment Failures

“Sorry, Harry,” Sirius said, pulling on his cloak. “I know I said I had time this morning, but Kingsley needs me to help out.”

“That’s alright,” Harry said mildly, “Sic ‘im, boy.”

The black potion-octopus bounced off three walls on its way to Sirius, and expanded in a stretch of gummy black into a bundle of tentacles that bound Sirius’ arms to his side and stuck him to the hallway wall.

Sirius gave him a look, and then blinked.

“I solved the finite encantatum problem,” Harry continued, still mild. “So we’re going to talk for just a few minutes, because I checked with Kingsley and you’re not on shift this morning. You’re out trying to hunt down Snape again. So you’ll take a break for a couple minutes from trying to get yourself killed, while I say something.”

“Harry-“

“You’re not keeping me locked up here with Dudley. I’m going to Bill and Fleur’s wedding, I’m picking up Ron and Hermione there, and I’ve got stuff to do. I’m not going back to Hogwarts to get locked up there for another year.”

“If you think I or the Order are going to let you get yourself killed, you’ve got another thing coming. Little tricks like this notwithstanding, Harry, you’re a long way from fighting an adult wizard. Kreacher!”

“Master called?” asked the house elf, garbed in a large Christmas-themed teatowel and a curtain cord.

“Get this thing off me.”

“Yes, master.”

The potion melted away, and Harry sighed. House elf magic. He’d have to deal with that one, too.

“Good try, Harry,” Sirius said with some good cheer. “And we can talk about the wedding, I want to see everyone too. The rest of it? Not a chance.”

This whole ‘having a parental figure who cared about you’ lark was pretty hard to get used to. At least it gave him someone to practice his potioneering on.

He was not, despite the temptation, going to copy Hermione’s plan to obliviate her parents. He didn’t think Sirius would find that the funny sort of prank.

Harry slouched down to the kitchen and threw himself into a chair. Dudley, his strangely shrunken cousin, was making breakfast.

“I still can’t get used to you doing your own cooking,” Harry commented.

Dudley was now Uncle Vernon sized, as opposed to two Uncle Vernons. He wore a purple muggle shirt with a catchphrase from popular culture Harry didn’t share with jeans. The purple was definitely Deadalus Diggle’s influence.
“It’s not a big deal. I’m not making fancy stuff.”

“Well, no, but…..”

“We were kids. You were a pain, you know.”

“I was, was I.”

“Always doing weird stuff.”

“I wasn’t actually trying to do it, most of the time.”

“Well. Enough about it, will you? I don’t even use that name anymore.”

“Er.”

“I like Dig. It’s got a good ring to it.”

“Okay, Dig.” Harry said doubtfully. “Sorry, I’m just distracted.”

“Trying to pick a fight with Sirius again ‘cause the geezer died.”

“…you are a font of wit and tact, Dig.”

“Shut it.”

Harry, who wanted breakfast, shut it. He rather liked grown-up Dudley – ‘Dig’ – and thought that Daedalus Diggle had had a very good effect on him. Dudley and Sirius, meanwhile, got along in an impenetrable discussion of music and engines, which had brought to Harry’s attention that Sirius’s best subject in school had actually been Muggle Studies.

It had been easy to convince Sirius they shouldn’t move, despite the threat of Snape – after all, as far as Harry could tell, Sirius really wanted Snape to batter down his door so Sirius could kill him. For one thing, the new blood wards were holding so far. For another, there were new spells on the exterior of the house, including a nasty Dumbledore illusion and some things that left Sirius moody, dark-eyed and wild.

Harry had had some snide things to say about people who used dark magic around impressionable children, and Sirius had told him to go to his room.

Harry had gone to his room, just for the novelty of it. Sirius had apologized, the next day, and Harry had laughed.

“You know I just went up to the potions lab after fifteen minutes, right?”

“Right,” Sirius said, looking relieved. “I’m lucky you’re not actually young and impressionable, that’s all.”

“I’ll get my revenge,” Harry had promised him.

Harry was still working on the revenge part, but like the whole household, it was a work in progress.

He was also working on pinning Sirius down long enough to talk to him. He couldn’t blame Sirius for being half-mad with grief, since Sirius had never really stopped being half-mad, but he could be cross with Sirius for being a good enough wizard that Harry couldn’t keep him paralyzed for more than a minute at a shot. Sirius appeared to think it was a game. Some days, Harry thought it was a
game too. Other days, Harry felt so wildly impatient he wanted to tackle Kreacher for enforcing Sirius’ rule about staying inside all the time.

#

The Ministry never had been happy that Sirius had never told them where he and Harry lived. They’d gotten around this in prior years by Harry living with the Weasleys, as representatives of the Ministry, for much of the summer and other seasons. While Snape would have told the Death Eaters the address, the Death Eaters didn’t pass this along to the Ministry.

Which was a long-winded way to say that Harry and Sirius could take a portkey to the Weasley wedding, and that both Hedwig and Mad-Eye Moody lived to hoot another day.

It was probable that Sirius took Harry’s requests to talk casually because Harry seemed happy. He spent a great deal of time in his potions lab, working on possible recipes and ingredient combinations – almost all of the work of potions could be done without magic or wand, after all, wand-work only coming in during the infusing stage. Harry could easily prepare fresh ingredients, experiment with mixtures, and catch up on his reading without any problems with the Trace, which he often almost entirely forgot about at Sirius’ house, where he’d never had any troubles with Ministry letters.

Harry, once he’d determined even the Black family library had nothing useful about Horcruxes, had settled down to have a bit of a break. Which meant working on an idea he’d had – well, four ideas he’d had, but one in particular. Harry couldn’t help thinking about all the people being put under the imperius, and his experiences with polyjuice. It seemed to him that it would be nice to be the inventor of a potion not that did anything to people, but that undid bad things done to people. Cleansing Elixir, he’d taken to calling it in his head. He was a unicorn, right? That was sort of his super power. So why shouldn’t he hark back to those old unicorn legends, and come up with a potion that could clear harmful effects from the body and mind, reversing memory erasure and imperius and polyjuice and all those things that altered people?

The base, obviously, would be unicorn hair and moonwater, but from there he hadn’t made much progress. Pennyroyal and tears seemed probable, but the condition of the pennyroyal and the creature that shed the tears (and their mood) would matter a great deal. He didn’t have the ingredients to experiment with it too much – long gathering trips were right out – so he settled for writing out his ideas in neat columns of combinations to try and discard, against enchantments he wanted to include in the cleansing.

Once Harry got to the Burrow, he realized the other reason Sirius had been avoiding talking to him. Sirius had been seriously gotten to by Molly Weasley, who was very much of the opinion that she was going to protect Harry and his friends from the world.
Planning and Preparations

Everyone in the Order seemed to have an opinion about where Harry and Sirius were moving upon Harry’s 17th birthday, when the blood wards would fade and the house would once again only be protected by a fading Fidelius charm and a variety of curses. Harry met Hermione’s eyes over dinner and vowed to himself that he didn’t care how busy he was being kept with wedding preparations, he was sneaking over to talk to Ron and Hermione come hell or high water.

“I call this Not Order meeting to order,” Harry said, sitting in a corner and looking at Ron, Hermione, and Crookshanks. “Crookshanks, don’t look at me like that, I’m working on finding Draco as soon as I can.”

Crookshanks continued to look at him like that.

“Results?” Hermione asked, sorting books.

“Sirius is avoiding me. I think he feels guilty about not being there for the Death Eater attack on the school.”

“Ginny’s in,” Ron said. “Mum isn’t, pretty obviously. Can’t tell which way Fred and George lean – they might lean one way each. Dad sort of is – he helped me with my alibi, I’ll show you in a minute.”

“My parents are in,” Hermione sighed, “For all the good it does me. I’ve charmed them to be Wendell and Monica Wilkins and move to Australia.”

Discussions of Hermione’s parents took some time, and included some tears. Ron and Hermione were hugging. Harry took a moment to hope they would date forever and ever, amen, so he could be a godfather.

He was probably getting ahead of himself.

“Supplies?” she asked again.

“Polyjuice and healing potion should be fine – I left Sirius a big stash to help him keep out of sight among the muggles. I don’t think I want to think about what he’d deal with if they catch on where he’s stationed,” said Harry. “And I’ve been working on a couple new ideas people won’t be expecting, but I won’t be able to bring anything with me. I’m going to give some of them to Fred and George to mass produce for me.”

“I borrowed a tent,” Ron said proudly. “Nice one, too, two stories. Barely smells of cats.”

Harry and Hermione shared a brief look of muggle-raised commiseration.

“I’ve double checked our undetectable extension charms and I’m trying to decide which books to bring,” Hermione said.

“Tell me about it,” Harry definitely didn’t whine. “There’s really no such thing as a mobile potions lab. Someone needs to invent a light weight collapsible cauldron for people on the move.”

“We’ll work on that,” Hermione concluded. “Next?”
“I’d kinda like to know where we’re going,” Ron pointed out.

“I have a sort of list,” Harry said. “In my head. Godric’s Hollow. Malfoy Manor.”

“Places that are significant to Voldemort?” Hermione asked.

That was a much better reason than Harry’s had been. He decided to pretend that was it.

“Right,” Harry said quickly. “Borgin and Burkes, that was his first job.”

They talked it over for a while longer. Hogwarts was added to the list, though they decided they needed an inside team to search there.

“It’s not like these things are subtle,” Ron pointed out. “Big honking aura of evil.”

“Hogwarts enchantments would hide that by suppressing it,” Hermione said. “Dark objects aren’t very effective inside Hogwarts.”

This was so reassuringly like a Hermione history lesson that Harry found himself relaxing.

“I wish you were more comfortable on a broom, Hermione,” he mentioned.

“I’m quite comfortable with apparition,” she said primly. “How are you two?”

“No missing eyebrows!” said Ron, pointing proudly to his existent eyebrows.

“I’ve been practicing as much as I can,” said Harry, leaning back and looking at the ceiling. “But I try to keep it spread out so it looks like people apparating around me, not me practicing. I don’t have time for one last underage magic hearing.”

“As if the Ministry has time or political capital for that,” Hermione said, and dove back into her pile of books like a seal.

Ron came over to sit with Harry, looking at him carefully.

“You going to be alright going off without Sirius being alright with it?”

“. . . yeah. I’ve got to do it, don’t I? I’m going to be seventeen in a few days. Time to grow up.”

“Mum thinks seventeen’s a good time to be a kid a while longer.”

“I’d rather be a grown up with more people alive than a kid with people trying to protect me and dying.”

Ron nodded. This was why Ron was great.

Mrs. Weasley frightening them all to death and sending Harry grabbing at his wand was not great. He had to take a minute before sorting wedding presents to calm himself down.

He wondered how old you had to be before you could start telling young people to go easy on your old heart.

#

Harry got into a screaming row with Sirius to celebrate his seventeenth birthday. Harry was not proud of any of the things he said. He doubted Sirius was proud of any of the things he said, either. It
ended like this:

“I’m not special! I’m not the Chosen One! I’m just another kid turning seventeen, and that means I’m old enough to fight! You don’t act this way around Fred and George!”

“You’re not another kid! You’re my kid! So you – you had best not die, you hear me?”

“I hear you.”

“Right.” Sirius cleared his throat and looked at the assembled very awkward guests. “Molly, I don’t suppose you have the makings of hot chocolate around the house? I promised Harry a cup, a while back.”

Hot chocolate was had by all, and Harry and Sirius were eyed by the French contingent as if they were dangerous crazy people. Molly took a turn to cry and be comforted by Arthur.

The sad part was that it was still up there in Harry’s top three birthdays.

#

“Wake up, kid.” Harry startled awake from a confusing dream about a green baby screaming to see Sirius looming out of the dark.

He loved Sirius, he really did, but Sirius was so creepy sometimes.

“Mhn?”

“We’re going to talk for a minute. Grab your broom.”

Harry grabbed his broom.

It turned out that when Sirius wanted to have a private conversation, you both ended up sitting precariously on the roof. Harry tried to look cool and calm, like he did this all the time.

“James and I loved the roof at Hogwarts,” Sirius told him. “We’d take our brooms up during the night. No one ever patrolled up there.”

Harry had been missing out on so much at Hogwarts being busy with people trying to kill him.

“So, what’s up?” Harry asked cautiously. He thought they were done with the fighting part.

“I can’t seem to stop you, so how can I help?”

Oh. Harry had to take a second.

“Safe houses,” Harry said after a minute. “Lots of them, all over. I don’t know where I’ll end up going.”

“You’re looking for something.”

“…yeah.”

“I won’t ask. I never asked Dumbledore, and he said we had to trust you. Said it was our only hope, actually.”

“…don’t just do it because of that. What if someone imperius’d me?”
“I’d be able to tell.”

Harry hmm’d thoughtfully, and glanced sideways at Sirius.

“You trust me?”

“I do.”

“I want Snape alive. I have some questions for him.”

“Kid – I can’t let you in the same room with him. He’s dangerous.”

“Alive, Sirius. Please.”

“We haven’t talked about him.”

“No.”

“You want to?”

“Merlin, no.”

“Okay.”

Sirius didn’t push. Harry was very happy about that.
Harry’s argument with Sirius had been based on his unwillingness to talk to Sirius about his presents and his plans as dinner was coming to a close. He had no time to think about Dumbledore’s bequests that evening.

(Harry had particularly liked Hermione’s answer to the Minister’s "Are you planning to follow a career in Magical Law, Miss Granger?" Hermione had said, “Yes, among others, but that is beside the point.”)

He’d seen that book of fairy tales before, somewhere, he was sure of it… in Dumbledore’s office? In the library? The Tales of Beedle the Bard… fairy tales….

Harry fell asleep, and dreamed. He was sitting in a library, reading a simple old book. He was oddly unable to move, his hands moving on their own. His fingers, long and white, pale and grasping as spiders, held the book ever so gently, as he flipped through the pages with familiarity – he’d done this before, many times….

Harry woke breathless in the dark of early morning, Ron sleeping quietly in the room next to him.

Voldemort.

The presents were definitely not random. Was it too early in the morning to tell Hermione?

It was definitely too early in the morning to be subtle about telling Hermione. Subtlety in all things, in all things subtlety – move delicately when your process is delicate….

It would keep for a few hours, he decided, and lay awake, trying to figure out how all the pieces fit together. Nitwit, blubber, oddment, tweak… Dumbledore’s mind worked in funny ways….

Harry fell back to sleep, for a little while.

#

For some reason, Harry was exhausted in the morning, stumbling his way through the beginning steps of the wedding as if in a zombie movie. He still felt the need to do magic at every opportunity, though, because who wouldn’t.

He kept pulling out his new watch and looking at it. Sirius had confided in him that he’d had to armwrestle Molly for the honor of giving him his watch, and that if he wanted two of them, it might make things a little more peaceful and diplomatic.

Harry, who relied on a pretty accurate and slightly magical sense of time and had since he was a tiny child, mumbled something and fled for fear one of them would start having feelings, only to be ambushed by a couple hugs, one from Molly and one from Sirius.

Harry looked at the watch a lot. It had belonged to Regulus Arcturus Black, at one point, and Harry had felt quite fond of the man since realizing he’d ditched the Death Eaters to help destroy a Horcrux.

#

Harry told Victor Krum that Ginny was dating someone very huge and threatening, and Victor Krum
got into an argument with Mr. Lovegood about a symbol recently used by Grindewald.

"The Ministry has fallen. Scrimgeour is dead. They are coming."

Harry saw Sirius with Remus, and didn’t see anything else before Hermione was apparating them to London.

Harry had never been more glad for his deep, abiding obsession with pockets.

“I’ve got my cloak and polyjuice for everyone,” he contributed. “This redhead’ll wear off soon, I hope everyone feels like being brunette. I’ve been collecting the most boring hair I can find for a few years. But I didn’t get the tent.”

“I’ve got it,” Hermione said, and Harry whistled softly, because her purse was tiny and he had a lot of respect for her.

“Well, I’ve got Pig,” said Ron. Both Hermione and Harry paused to stare at him.

“I’m not taking him out here, he’s sleeping,” Ron said, nudging them forwards. “I do listen to you fellows, you know. I’ve been training him to sleep days in my pocket.”

“Ron, I could kiss you,” said Hermione.

He grinned.

“Don’t let me stop you.”

She flapped a hand at him, but Harry caught her smiling. It was a nice light-hearted moment as they scrambled to change clothes and down polyjuice.

“Can’t take any more until this dose wears off,” Harry muttered, frowning at himself. He pulled his pockets out of the pockets of his dress robes and snapped them into the pockets of the hoodie Hermione handed him.

“Put your cloak on over everything,” Hermione suggested, voice deepening slightly as she became as dun-haired boy with a forgettable face. “And let’s go.”

“Do we have a plan?” Harry asked.

“I don’t know about you,” and Harry was proud of how calm she sounded, “But I feel like lying low for a little while before going anywhere at all.”

Harry considered the idea of lying low, and approved. They slid into a little café, and Ron and Hermione talked about next steps as he felt the dose of polyjuice wear off. He got up and ambled to the bathroom, out of sight, to take his own dose of bland polyjuice in curly-haired blond flavor – he got a girl, worst luck – and ambled back out to spot two burly men about to hex Ron and Hermione.

Harry stunned one of them in the back silently, and then things devolved into violence and memory charms. They did pause to see who the hell they were dealing with before leaving, though. Death Eaters. It figured.

“What happened?” he asked them once they were all safely out of the restaurant, trying not to double-take at his two brown-haired companion and his own girlhood.

“No idea,” said Ron. “We were just talking when they came in.”
Weird. Something about it twinged Harry’s memory, but he obviously hadn’t thought it an important enough memory to index. What a pain.

“I think… it’ll come to me,” he said, because Hermione looked close to panic. “I’ve heard of this somewhere. Some spell.”

This was almost as frustrating as forgetting the critical clue until the last possible minute.

“Then we stick to the plan,” Hermione said. “Find a place to disapparate to the countryside to have a think.”

And that’s what they did. They ended up in the woods where the Quidditch Cup had been held, green and gold and beautiful.

They sat down on patches of emerald moss and rather fell apart. Harry wasn’t proud of it, later.

Then the patronus appeared.

"Family safe, do not reply, we are being watched."

Well, that was something, at least.

“Right,” Harry said after a while. “I suppose we should get back to work.”

“D’we have work to do?” Ron asked. “No homework here.”

“I think Dumbledore gave us some,” Harry said. “The bequest. I saw Voldemort reading that book, in a vision. We’re going to figure them out. Starting with the snitch – because I wasn’t trying very hard to open it, the first time.”

_I open at the close_, was not an illuminating clue, but Harry was beginning to expect that from his headmaster. It was pleasantly consistent after a day of revelations and broken tables.

And then they were interrupted by another pair of Death Eaters. Harry was so done with this. Running, cursing, dodging, losing track of Ron, hiding behind a tree and cracking the seals on two of his capture potions – ‘go for the big fellows’ – and then dropping to the ground to edge his way back towards the action.

Ron was slumped to the ground, still. Hermione was frantically parrying spells by one of them. The other – Harry heard a gasp from behind him, and turned.

The other was pinned to a tree by a gummy black potion, and he silently stunned the man before turning back to Hermione and Ron.

That man, too, had just been tackled by a bouncing black gummy ball of octopus. He took two stunners to the face.

“Well,” Harry said, going immediately to Ron’s side and checking his pulse. “Alright. He’s fine, Hermione.”

“I suppose we’re lucky that they wanted prisoners,” she said in a high uncertain voice. “If we looked like ourselves, I expect we would have had a different… different…”

“It’s too bad we can’t make enough polyjuice to never look like ourselves, hm,” Harry said, shaking Ron.
“Let me.”

Hermione woke Ron with the appropriate spell. Hermione was bleeding from the temple and from a cut on her arm. Harry absently offered her a piece of red candy, and the three of them studied their new friends.

“I have never been so glad to have a bottle of veritaserum in my life,” Harry said, very mildly.

The strangest thing about the interrogation was that one of their two Death Eaters was Stan Stunpike, who was not entirely clear why he’d joined up, but was certain it was the best decision he’d ever made. The other was another along the same lines of Mr. Crabbe – stupid was putting it gently. The only plan they’d been let in on of the Dark Lord’s was the taboo.

“Obliviate these ones too, and move camp,” Harry decided. “The more time we spend here, the longer they’ll have time to find reinforcements. They have to still be scrambling with the Ministry and the rest of the order, V- he will be busy.”

Hermione took care of the obliviation while Ron and Harry packed, including Harry coaxing two sulky potions named Coal and Soot back into their bottles, then she took another turn apparaating them.

“Where are we this time?” Harry asked, who was beginning to strongly suspect that all forests looked the same.

“The Forest of Dean,” Hermione said in what was now full night. “And I’m exhausted and hungry and if anyone even thinks that name, I will hex them into next week.”

Voldemort, Harry thought, because he was naturally contrary.
He grasped his pounding head and fell to the ground, then in an explosion of agony, he felt the rage that did not belong to him possess his soul, saw a long room lit only by firelight, and the giant blond Death Eater on the floor, screaming and writhing, and a slighter figure standing over him, wand outstretched, while Harry spoke in a high, cold, merciless voice.

"More, Rowle, or shall we end it and feed you to Nagini? Lord Voldemort is not sure that he will forgive this time.... You called me for this, to tell me that Harry Potter has escaped again? Draco, give Rowle another taste of our displeasure.... Do it, or feel my wrath yourself!"

A log fell in the fire: Flames reared, their light darting across a terrified, pointed white face.

Harry drew his love around him like wings of fire, for Sirius and Ron and Hermione and yes, even Snape still, and thought carefully and clearly into the darkness between their minds,

You should really work on you occlumency, you know. Aren’t you supposed to be a grownup?

"Crucio," Draco said, softly and clearly, and the man on the ground writhed again.

"You brought back nothing for me?" Voldemort said, apparently ignoring Harry.

The man on the ground babbled apologies. Draco, eyes never leaving his task said, “I did retrieve a girl I thought could be useful, my lord, but not regarding Potter. Her name is Luna Lovegood, and she is the daughter of the owner of the Quibbler.”

“I have heard the name before.”

“She is engaged to Gregory Goyle.”

“We shall have to teach her what is expected from a woman who is part of a decent family.”

“I gave her to my mother, my lord.”

Voldemort seemed to consider this for a few moments.

“Avada kedavra,” Voldemort said, and Rowle was dead. Just like that. Harry wished he could close his eyes.

“Harry Potter is visiting us tonight, because he is still alive. Do you have anything to say for yourself, Draco?”

Draco cringed away.

“You would be a powerful weapon if you could only locate your spine. You are dismissed.”

Harry dropped away from the vision, fighting the pull of the anger that still flared through his scar, and was back in the darkness of the Forest of Dean.

“Harry? Harry?” It was Ron.

“Ron. He’s – I’m – we don’t have to move again, I don’t think. Can we talk about it in the morning?”

They had to talk about it that night. Not that they got anywhere, all still too tired and battle-weary for
anything but babbling and falling asleep mid-word.

#

They slept very late the next morning, and dawdled around their new campsite. Hermione demonstrated the anti-tracking wards she’d put together, and Harry demonstrated his eavesdropper-detection spell. Figuring out which spells should be added to the campsite became the problem of the day, though Hermione walled herself off around lunchtime to read The Tales of Beedle the Bard and Ron and Harry spent the next few hours arguing about Ron’s owl.

Ron, for obvious reasons, wanted to warn his family about the taboo. Harry wanted to warn Sirius, and also to not lose Ron’s owl to a cutting curse.

Harry also wanted to lead an assault on Malfoy Manor, which met with equal parts disbelief and anger from both Ron and Hermione. After all, hadn’t Harry learned anything the last time? The only thing that running after hostages would do was to have him take more hostages.

It wasn’t that they were truly angry with each other. It was that they were all adjusting to the idea that there wouldn’t be a teacher to swoop in to whisk them off to a hospital wing or a parent to scold them for running into trouble. There was just more trouble, day after day, and no way to tell what was happening in the Wizarding World.

“The problem is,” Hermione said over afternoon tea, prepared around a small blue fire, “I think this was the plan. The Order is the decoy, the larger threat of adult wizards. We’re the sneak attack coming around from the back, that no one really believes will be a threat because we’re kids. We’re not supposed to have contact with the Order, I don’t think.”

“I could really grow to hate Dumbledore’s plans,” Harry said, and took a meditative sip of his tea.

“The problem is, I think it might be rather a good plan,” said Hermione.

“So, what, we just focus on the horcruxes while our friends and family are attacked? Tortured?”

“Unless you want Vol-“

“Don’t say it!” yelled Ron.

Hermione looked down into her tea.

“Sorry.”

“’s alright,” said Ron, relaxing slowly back into his seat. “It’ll just be my job to remind you two.”

“You were saying?” Harry asked, after an awkward pause.

“Unless we want him coming back when our children are grown up and having them fight him,” Hermione said quietly, “Someone has to deal with the horcruxes. We’ve got time, clues, supplies… no one else has any of those.”

“We’d have to swing back by Grimmauld Place if we want basilisk fangs,” Harry commented. “I haven’t carried them around since one of them melted a hole in its wrapping and halfway through the dragonskin around that. They’re all in a big stone box there now.”

“Did Snape know about them?” asked Ron.

“…no,” Harry said after a moment. “I never did have a reason to mention it to him. I thought he’d
say something snide about swanning my way into danger again.”

“Good,” said Ron.

Ron had still not forgiven Snape for Dumbledore. Since Hermione and Harry hadn’t either, they didn’t argue.

#

In the end, the only message they dared send was via the DA coins, which now read *Taboo: say name of YNW and DE summoned. Spread word.*

Realistically, the only person they’d manage to warn was Neville.
Events at Malfoy Manor

There was something very disconcerting about watching Luna Lovegood following his mother around like a blonde sort of duckling, wearing his mother’s idea of acceptable robes for a girl. She looked naked somehow without her ridiculous glasses and hats and earrings and spectacles, in simple dark blue robes with her hair straight and glossy and under control. She looked, in fact, eerily like he might have if he was a girl, Draco thought.

Draco was not really sure this had been a good idea. He looked down at the little piece of stone in his hand, which shifted restlessly from a rosy granite to a shiny feldspar to a white marble to a sparkly variety of mica, before returning to the granite. He should probably avoid developing any more nervous habits. He should probably stop thinking. Thinking never led anywhere good. Granite, marble, mica, feldspar, granite, mica, marble.

There was a hiss. Draco glanced up at his mother, who’d just pinched Luna’s arm.

“Manners,” his mother hissed.

Draco had been a tiny, tiny child the last time his mother had been stressed enough about his manners in public to react so openly about them. Luna folded her hands – ah, she’d been fidgeting again. His mother never could abide fidgeting.

Mica, granite, quartz, marble.

“Draco, darling, what are you doing?” his mother asked in a dangerously sweet voice.

“Practicing, mother. I have an idea for a new sort of transfiguration, but I need to practice on small things first.”

“Remember, dears. Composure.”

Draco was beginning to wonder if his mother had forgotten that Luna wasn’t his sister. Well, she did have a lot on her mind.

“Mother, I was wondering if I could go see father?”

“Your father wishes you to concentrate on pleasing the Dark Lord, Draco,” his mother said, lips thin and white. Draco took this to mean his father did not quite comprehend that Draco had a task for the Dark Lord, and that his father was not doing well. At least his mother had Luna to focus on….

Luna’s knuckles were white as she clasped her hands together.

“That doesn’t look very composed, Luna,” he drawled, glad to have someone beneath him in the hierarchy of people yelling at each other.

She glared at him, huge blue eyes narrow.

“Wrackspurts.”

“You’re not doing anyone any good,” he said severely. “Think of a nice book or something.”

Honestly, he should have left her to get caught in the crossfire at the Burrow, someone probably would have dragged her to safety. Instead he had to think about Greg’s face if his fiancée got caught by a stray killing curse and drag her to… not safety.
It just went to show no one should let him make any decisions.

There was a thump from the doorframe of the sitting room. Draco winced.

“Professor Snape?” He asked. He just wished this wasn’t the first time this had happened. (He was never thinking about the first time this happened ever again.)

“Draco.”

This time, Professor Snape managed to get through the door without hitting it on the way. Draco took him by the wrist and led him to a chair, pushing him firmly down into it.

“Your name is Severus Snape. We are in Malfoy Manor. Your memory has been adjusted. It’s the 20th of August, the weather is rainy with a chance of thunderstorms, the Dark Lord rules, and Albus Dumbledore is dead. Do you need any of that again?”

“…Draco. No, I have it.”

Draco went to the sideboard and poured a glass of wine. After a furtive glance at his mother, he poured two, and handed her one as he passed. She was sitting very still and very quietly with Luna. Were they literally practicing sitting still?

Given the sorts of things people had to sit still through, here, Draco couldn’t blame them. It was nice to have the company.

He handed Professor Snape the other glass of wine.

“Sir… what does he do?” Draco couldn’t help but asking.

Professor Snape took a sip of the wine, and met his eyes calmly.

“I have no idea, Draco. But I do remember… enough.” Snape’s dark gaze sharpened, sweeping the room. “I see you are enjoying company in my absence.”

“Mother and Luna were kind enough to wait with me.”

“Miss Lovegood. Has it been decided whether you will be returning to Hogwarts with us?”

“They don’t think it best,” Luna said lightly. “Because I’m very angry with all of you, you see.”

Professor Snape took another sip of wine, and seemed to lose focus again.

Granite, marble, green marble….

“That’s absurd,” Draco said, trying for amusement. “Who decided that?”

“Your aunt, Draco,” his mother said in a colorless voice.

“Why?”

“Because she is useful leverage, my dear.”

“She’ll still be useful leverage at Hogwarts. She can set an example for the rest of them, they’ll need it….” Draco sighed. “I’ll have to talk to Greg, I suppose. It’s about time he got over this silly idea of running around with mudbloods and freaks. He could keep an eye on her at school.”
“Gregory Goyle is a blood traitor, Draco,” his mother said sharply.

“He’s an idiot, mother. He simply goes where he’s led, and he fell in with people who led him wrong. I really should have kept a shorter leash on him… in any case, he should be here. With his family.”

His mother’s lips thinned, but she didn’t immediately retort.

“Professor,” Draco said, trying a different tact, “Would you be willing to go with me to fetch Greg? We could talk to Mr. Lovegood at the same time.”

“If,” Professor Snape said sourly, “You receive permission from our master for the mission.”

“Right,” Draco said crisply. “I’ll do that.”

“Draco,” his mother said worriedly, standing, but Draco flickered cat and left the room at a trot before she could grab him or curse him.

This was, he thought, a stupid plan, but he was so scared and so alone and so tired of not having Greg with him. And the way Luna looked at him….

#

The problem was that he was too scared to actually go into the study Lord Voldemort had been using. The cat’s mind might simplify things, but it still knew larger predator that would eat it when it smelled it.

The cat did not want to go in there. The cat would much rather hide in a shadow and watch the door warily.

After a few minutes, the door opened and he found himself, ears pinned back in terror, looking up into the amused red eyes of Lord Voldemort. Blast it, what was the etiquette for animagi – was he supposed to shift back? Running away and hiding under a bed was not the right etiquette. Freezing in terror was definitely incorrect, and yet it was all he could think to do.

The Dark Lord picked him up by the scruff of his neck and carried him into the room. He was getting to be a larger cat, so this involved struggling to breathe. He was dropped onto the floor by the fire, and Lord Voldemort resumed his seat in one of the high-backed chairs.

“Lord Voldemort will hear you.”

Oh, thank Merlin, a cue. Draco shifted, straightened himself until he was kneeling, and said formally, “I request permission, my lord, for a mission to retrieve Gregory Goyle. I believe he could – would – be an asset. My lord.”

“You believe this will make me angry.”

“He has… a great many odd ideas, my lord. He is vicious, simplistic, and devoted, but he has… a great many odd ideas.”

“Such as?”

“He believes in the Rotfang conspiracy and that we should not harm muggle filth because they went to the moon.”

Which Draco still doesn’t understand, honestly. What does going to the moon have to do with
anything? He could probably go to the moon if he wanted to, but he doesn’t, because it’s an absurd waste of time and magic. Muggles: completely inexplicable and awful.

“This is not your only motivation.”

“No,” Draco whispered. He wanted his friends with him. He wanted not to be the youngest person in every room he was in, except for people who were about to die. He’d never felt stronger than when he had both Greg and Vince at his shoulders. But that wasn’t something he was going to share with his lord and master. “I believe Professor Snape would be happier if she – if Luna - came with us to Hogwarts. If Greg agreed to be one of us, he wouldn’t know how to break his word. He could keep an eye on her.”

“I enjoy tormenting Severus Snape,” Lord Voldemort observed quietly.

Draco held very still.

“Bring Lord Voldemort Gregory Goyle and Vincent Crabbe. Then it will be decided if they are worthy of joining my Death Eaters.”

“Thank you, master,” Draco said, half-hypnotized, and withdrew from the room as smoothly as he knew how.
Clues and News

Reading and rereading the *Tales of Beedle the Bard* in the hopes that it would yield some clue was peaceful but not restful. To pass the time, the trio speculated about how to pass news to their friends and confound their enemies. Hermione, cautious, was inclined to keep them from venturing too far into places that could be traps, like Godric’s Hollow, or certain death, like Malfoy Manor. They added the Muggle orphanage that Riddle had grown up in to the list.

Discussion turned to the Sword of Gryffindor, which had also been on the list from Dumbledore. It was Ron who had the bright idea.

“It’s obvious, innit? He’s turned all the rest of the founders things into horcrux. He must want this one for one, too.”

“We can’t let him have it,” Harry said firmly. Imagining having to destroy that magic sword the way the locket had been destroyed….

“But we don’t know if it’s still at Hogwarts,” said Hermione. “What are we going to do, go back and check?”

Harry perked up.

“That’s exactly what we’re going to do.”

“Harry!”

“We’re students, aren’t we? We sneak in on the train and the enchantments won’t get us, it’s not like we’re not allowed. We get the sword and talk to Draco and Neville, get some news. That’s just a couple weeks away. We leave through the statue of the humpbacked witch when we’re done.”

Ron and Hermione looked very doubtful. Struck by the idea, however, Harry plowed on as persuasively as he knew how.

“We know that school better than anyone. We’ve got a map, and we need to check there for horcrux – it’s too bad we don’t have Greg with us, he’s like a sniffer dog for them.”

“I don’t know, Harry….” Said Hermione.

“You’ve been saying that they’d expect me to go to Godric’s Hollow, right? Does anyone expect us to go to Hogwarts? They won’t be watching for us there, not really, because they don’t know about the secret passages. We could keep away from the populated areas, use the invisibility cloak, move around at night….”

Harry could see the plan catch on in Ron’s mind, but he kept watching Hermione.

“I’m sorry, Harry. There just aren’t enough contingency plans – anything could go wrong there and we’d be trapped, it’s a fortress.”

“…so we bring another way out,” Harry said, and paused, thinking. A portkey? No.

“Brooms,” said Ron, “If they’ll fit in your magic bag, Hermione.”

“We can always fall out a window or jump off the top of the tower, that way,” Harry agreed.
The large problem of where to go next became the smaller problem of how to get there and where to steal brooms from. Which became the even smaller problem of what disguises to wear for a quick trip to Diagon Alley for supplies, a couple of cheap broomsticks, a visit the bank, and a swing by Borgin & Burkes, which everyone agreed was a great jumble of dark things to potentially hide a dark thing in.

“And the apothecary,” Harry said. “I need more supplies if we’re going to keep depending on polyjuice, and somewhere to brew potions in safely.”

“I’m sure I saw a spell for air circulation in the Standard Book of Spells,” Hermione said, fingers obviously itching to dive back in to the reassuring world of research.

“What can I do, mate?” Ron asked. Harry blinked at him.

Oh, right. Ron wasn’t a bookworm type. Quick as a whip in a fight, and the best guy to have in your corner, but not happy in a book the way he and Hermione were….

“Keep us on task,” Harry said. “You know I go running off after daydreams and forget important details, and Hermione would forget to eat and sleep if we let her. You’re the one who spent the last year coaching a team, aren’t you?”

“Well, not really….” mumbled Ron.


“S’ppose if I’m going to be the auror – someone give me some parchment, I’m going to organize our clues.”

Parchment was dutifully handed over. Ron glanced over at him.

“What do you think, do I look like a proper detective?”

“Just need a pipe and a deerstalker hat.”

“Why would a hat stalk deer?”

“It’s a muggle thing, about a famous detective called Sherlock Holmes….”

#

This time, their disguises were a blandly pretty black-haired boy, a black girl, and a tall, skinny black-haired man. Harry, typically, got the girl again. Hermione pointed out to him it wasn’t a picnic going the other way, either.

“Where’d you get the money for all this stuff?” Ron asked him as they strolled casually into the Leaky Cauldron early on the morning of August 24th. “I thought the ingredients were expensive.”

“I’ve been selling stuff for years, you know,” Harry said, attempting to be casual. “It just adds up after a while. Your, er, brother, he’s helpful.”

“Oh, right,” said Ron, who never had been one for capitalism despite his own protestations to the contrary.

The Leaky Cauldron was nearly empty, and the two patrons who were having breakfast were engaged in a whispered argument over a newspaper. Harry and Ron – he was pretty sure that was
Ron – exchanged a worried glance.

Diagon Alley was covered in posters of Harry’s face.

“I think we need to get a paper,” Harry managed numbly. Instead of their planned route, they turned their party towards the bookshop and its promised news.

Harry smoothed out the paper. A huge photograph of his own face filled the front page. He read the headline over it:

WANTED FOR QUESTIONING ABOUT THE DEATH OF ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

Harry and Hermione were both busy coping with guilt complexes, so perhaps it wasn’t surprising that they were steered by a casual-seeming not casual at all Ron into Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes first on their list of errands. Harry didn’t quite hear the usual opening speech the twins gave – it sounded a little forced, in tone – but what he did hear was Hermione asking, voice hesitant, “We’d – we’d like three portable swamps, please. It’s going to be my little sister’s birthday.”

“Well,” said Fred.

“Well, well,” said George.

“You’d better come through to the back,” Fred said. “George can mind the shop, can’t you, George?”

“Course I can,” George said. “Make ‘em give you a load of galleons for that lot.”

“Who do you take me for?” asked Fred.

The trio shuffled into the back of the shop. The door was closed, intruders were checked for, wards were cast, and then Fred was hugging his little brother to death.

“George’ll be so mad he didn’t get to talk to you,” Fred said. “Now, what can we do for you? We’ve got news, Order news, DA news, a neat little pile of money – you shouldn’t have come here, really, though, they do have chaps watching us. We’ve got maybe two minutes before they get suspicious.”

Harry was a little dizzy with all this.

“Everyone’s alright?” Ron asked.

“Mum and dad are. She’s busy with the Order, and dad’s keeping his head down at work. Percy’s fine, of course. Now, before we go any further – how about a bit more to prove you are who you say you are?”

Harry had never seen that cool, watchful look in Fred’s eyes before. He hated it. He recited the secret ingredient for extendable ears anyway, and was startled to get a hug too.

“You make a weirdly fit girl,” Fred told him, which Harry was not sure how to process.

“How’d you know which one of us was Ron?” Harry asked, to change the subject.

“I know his wand, don’t I? Seen it enough times. It’s got a chip in it near the rear end.”

“Ron, you should take better care of your wand,” said Hermione, and Fred grinned.
“No time, Hermione. Right. News – you’ve seen the papers? Well, here’s what’s happened with the Order since we got the news about the jinx on His Snakiness’s name – we tested it by confunding a little girl to ask her mum about who he was in the street, not particularly proud of that, but we’ve got the word out as best we can now. It’s all about the muggleborns right now….”
Fred gave them a spare copy of the twin’s Gringotts key, saying it was stupid to access Harry’s vault – who knew who was monitoring that. The goblin accepted it from Ron with a quiet ‘Ronald Weasley for Fred and George Weasley’s vaults, I’m on their list’ and the presentation of his wand as proof.

Which was all going far too well, of course.

It turned out that Gringotts had a waterfall that erased Polyjuice. The goblin manning their cart as it slid to a halt, coincidentally, had a very large ax. The alarm was particularly strident.

“We’re polyjuice addicts!” Harry shouted.

The goblin paused, ax still raised. The red light from the alarm flashed eerily across the cave. He eyed Harry, Hermione, and Ron, now revealed as their very damp selves.

“Gringotts is neutral in wizard wars,” the goblin said.

“Then can we go on to my brother’s vault?” Ron asked. “Um, please?”

“You are on the list,” the goblin allowed, and a moment later the alarm faded and they sailed on.

Harry was struck by the comfortable feeling of the caves, of the way the cart swooped and glided, the sleeping dragon in the distance. It felt like being home.

“If I had something really secret, I’d hide it here,” Ron said admiring. “Cor.”

Harry made frantic hand gestures at Hermione behind the goblin’s back. Hermione, sadly, did not speak frantic hand gesture.

“Do you think there’s any chance of goblins not remaining neutral?” Hermione asked the goblin, misinterpreting Harry wildly. Harry sighed, and tried to feel if they were closer or farther away from the looming familiar feeling of evil. He got basically nothing. “If when we win the Ministry agreed to make restitution for past damages to goblin interests, or reconsidered wand legislation?”

“This would not happen,” the goblin said shortly.

“I don’t see why not,” she plowed on. “If suitable contracts are made. We rather intend to take over the Ministry once the war is over, using Harry’s position as a stepping stone.”

Ron mouthed ‘we do?’ at Harry and Harry shrugged helplessly.

“I’ve been involved in a society for the promotion for House Elf welfare for many years now,” Hermione continued to the goblin’s stony silence, “And I think there’s a great deal of room for improvement in wizarding relations to other magical species.”

“Wizards. Selfish.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You think all goblins care about is wands, little girl.”

“Do you not? In History of Magic, we were taught that the, um, I’m not sure what you called the recent wars-“
“Wands are a symbol of wizard arrogance, wizard greed. We care about your greed.”

“You make a great deal of money from our greed, too,” Hermione countered.

The goblin grinned at her, toothily and unrelenting.

“Please, I would like to understand,” she said coaxingly. “Is there a book on the subject I could read?”

They plunged down a dizzying incline, and Ron and Harry yelped. Hermione, on the trail of knowledge she didn’t already have, didn’t even notice, gaze firm and intent on the goblin Sourfang.

“It is not long enough for a book,” the goblin said shortly. “Wizards are thieves.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Your classes do teach that goblins are the master craftsmen of the world. We make. Wizards pay for the use, and then they steal.”

“I’m sorry… they buy it and then they steal it?”

“No.”

“They rent it and then they steal it?”

This went around and around for a few minutes, and Harry began to suspect the goblin of stalling them by taking them along an extended path. He checked his wand, because if they were going to have to break out of a bank while fighting Death Eaters… well, they’d break out of a bank while fighting Death Eaters, he supposed.

“Oh, you mean they lease the weapons and jewelry and so on and don’t return them? Why didn’t you just say so? Can’t you take them to court to retrieve the items?”

“…wizard courts. Wizard laws.”

“Surely wizard laws include the concepts of leases,” Hermione protested. “Muggle law includes tons of leases – everyone leases their land from the crown, after all.”

“Wizards,” the goblin said, in a dangerous tone, “Do not obey contracts.”

Hermione scowled furiously at the cavern ceiling.

“When I’m Minister of Magic,” she said after a furious pause, “I’m asking goblins to take over the court system as well. Honestly. Between this and imprisoning people without trials and – and – it’s all so silly. How does anyone ever get anything done?”

“Wizards,” the goblin said, ears perking up for the first time in this conversation, “Do not get things done. They squabble and they play tricks and they breed. There are books about what the magical economy was like before we took it over.” He grinned toothily. “It was… silly.”

“Merlin,” Hermione said with feeling.

Harry patted her shoulder tentatively.

“Hermione, we can’t fix everything today. C’mon, um. We need to get on with our errands.” He gave the goblin a narrow-eyed look. “I’m sure the vault isn’t much further.”
The goblin flicked an ear in acknowledgement, and indeed, it seemed the vault was just around the bend. Magically.

Maybe frantic hand signals had their place after all. Harry had the feeling that if Hermione wasn’t so big-hearted, so prone to thinking the best of things with sharp teeth and sharper ideas, that they would have been a big old ‘let’s get along’ present for Voldemort. Instead, they left the goblin outside the vault watching them as if they were tasty little lambs, ripe for the plucking. Harry was probably mixing his metaphors.

On the other hand, he knew a predator when he saw one.
Harry Alone

The conversation with Mr. Borgin is going quite well, Harry thought, right up until the Death Eater squad led by Voldemort bursts into the shop and it becomes abruptly, blazingly obvious that the man had been stalling them by chatting amiably about techniques for tracking dark objects, goblin-made artifact lore, and items related to the Hogwarts founders value and rarity.

Harry still doesn’t know who or what tipped them off, but he’s abruptly reminded that he and Hermione and Ron are drastically outclassed as he dodges frantically between towering cabinets of creepy knickknacks, heading one way to try to lead the Death Eaters away from his friends. The Death Eaters split but don’t come after him en masse – of course not, he’s a girl, they don’t know it’s him they want.

He thinks of Ron lying still on a forest floor as he ducks a blast of green light. He won’t get that lucky a second time.

He takes a corner – this store is so confusing – and there’s a Death Eater standing right in front of him. Harry reacts first.

“Expelliarmus!” he shouts, knocking one Death Eater unconscious with the wild burst of his disarming spell.

“It’s this one!” someone calls, and Voldemort laughs high, wild, and free, and Harry can’t remember being this scared since the cemetery.

It draws the attention of every Death Eater in the store, and they converge.

“He’s mine,” Voldemort warns, and Harry is face to face with the man for the first time since the Department of Mysteries. Voldemort is smiling. Harry is surrounded, three men at each end of the narrow aisle of junk with leveled wands.

“Done dodging, Harry?” he said. “You never did learn much dignity. Your father died on his feet, you know, like a man.

“Not that many places to dodge, here,” Harry said, wand held loose and ready.

“I have solved the little issue that interrupted our last duel,” Voldemort told him. “So I will be brief.”

He raised an unfamiliar wand, and a jet of green light flared – countered by a burst of golden fire from Harry’s wand, of its own accord, blinding Harry and every last Death Eater, hitting Voldemort’s arm even as the man dodged.

Harry abruptly doesn’t care about his lack of apparition license (or skill). Destination – Privet Drive, Surrey, someplace he can visualize in an instant. Determination not to die. Deliberation – he takes a moment to clear his mind, twists-

He stands in a road in Surrey, next to a handsomely trimmed hedge, and curses himself. All he could do was dodge, didn’t have time to react, didn’t have time to do anything. If not for holding the brother wand to Voldemort, he’d be dead. Again. He has no idea what’s happened to Hermione and Ron, no owl, no practice with patronus messages. Was it the conversation in the street that had tipped someone off? He hadn’t said Voldemort, he knew he hadn’t, but Hermione had called him Harry when she’d been telling him off for thinking about breaking into a bank….
Harry started walking down the street, hands in his pockets, trying not to think about his friends’ faces still and dead like Cedric. He never should have let them come, gotten them involved. He should have argued. He should have realized going to Diagon Alley was stupid, going to Knockturn Alley was suicidal.

He needed to get under the shelter of wards right now.

Cursing himself for an idiot, Harry glanced around for muggles and shrugged on his invisibility cloak before continuing on towards the park. It wasn’t a large park, or a wooded park, but Harry was running low on ideas.

Hopefully Hermione and Ron were out there somewhere, together, and he’d be able to catch up with them on the Hogwarts train. There was something to be said for having made a couple plans for the next few weeks ahead of time.

#

Hermione’s little otter found Harry a few hours later, as he was sitting in a tree and contemplating the advisability of toppling off the tree and trying to break his own neck. Harry, who knew full well how tricky it was to kill wizards, suspected glumly that he’d end up bouncing. On the other hand, he might figure out the trick to flying without a broomstick. Hermione had his, which Harry was regretting. He was regretting so many things. If he’d died, he’d never have been able to tell Snape he might probably forgive him someday, assuming he stopped being quite so much of a self-destructive git. Never talk to Sirius again, never see if Dudley continued on his trajectory towards being a semi-decent human being, never see Ron and Hermione married with lots of curly-haired babies.

The silver otter he’d completely failed to notice said in Hermione’s voice, Harry, we’re safe. Ron’s hurt, but it’s nothing we can’t cure. We’ll see you at the next stop. Stay safe.

Oh. Harry probably shouldn’t attempt half-hearted suicide, then. Except he rather did like the idea of flying….

He tipped himself sideways off the branch, not giving himself time to think about it, cloak flapping all the way down. Three fourths of the way down, Harry had the presence of mind to think to himself Up!

There was a brief, frozen moment where he hung suspended in the air.

Harry hit the ground, hard, right side a blaze of agony, right wrist a mass of pain. Grass was soft, but it wasn’t very soft.

That, Harry thought to himself blurrily, had been a stupid idea. The worst part was, it had worked – he’d felt that moment of flight, like being on a broomstick, and the pain in his wrist was certainly distracting him from feeling sorry for himself.

Probably, Harry thought, he should avoid breaking any more bones just to prove to himself he was alive. Hermione would kill him.

“Accio bone mending potion,” he muttered to himself, and then as a muggle with a dog started down the lane, he rolled under a bush.

There was a twig in his eye, his wrist was still probably broken, his friends were somewhere far away, he was definitely not going to be able to change his mind about breaking into Hogwarts if he wanted to find his friends again, and his wand was setting things on fire with a mind of its own.
Today had started out so well.

#

Harry got nothing particularly useful done over the next week and change he had to wait before meeting the Hogwarts Express and his friends. He kept moving, practicing his terrible apparition and much better pickpocketing skills – being invisible was very helpful with that. On the off chance that Hermione and Ron had the same idea, he stopped by the Muggle orphanage that had been on their list, as someplace away from wizards that he might be able to do something productive at.

It was an office building construction site. Harry, rather spitefully, stole an executive’s sandwich from his lunch on a bench out front. It was tuna.

Surprisingly good tuna, actually, with crunchy onions and a nice spicy white sauce – maybe horseradish? – and a soft Kaiser roll.

Which was not the point. A good sandwich was not going to stop Harry’s bad mood, even if the sun had come out and birds were chirping at him attractively from the park across the way. Harry was angry and lonely and afraid, and he wasn’t going to be cheered up just because….

A little girl was playing with a puppy. The puppy, a setter, was yapping and jumping and cute and….

Harry found himself grinning from under his cloak as he watched the little girl tell her puppy he was her horse and she was a knight and they were going to save the world. He was leaning against a wrought iron fence in the middle of muggle London, all alone, and muggle London was wonderful. They had no idea what was happening in the magical world, the danger they were in.

Harry would do a lot to keep these people safe, happy, and unafraid. He ate the last bite of his sandwich, tucked his hands into his pockets, and wandered off towards the tube station, humming a song by the Weird Sisters.
There were guards at the train station, but there was only so much they could do to corral a seething mass of nervous children. Harry used his cloak and the sheer chaos of the situation to drift past them. Draco seemed to be in his element ordering people around and yelling at things, with both Crabbe and Goyle at his shoulders. It was like old times, really.

He slipped up the train steps and started ambling down the corridor, staying to one side. It was early, but most of the compartments already had someone in them. He recognized Neville, some girls from Ravenclaw, Pansy Parkinson, Neville again….

Harry backtracked. This compartment had Neville sitting in quiet conversation with a hulking Slytherin he vague recognized. Talk about suspicious, if you knew Neville. He slid the compartment door open, stepped in, and had two wands pointed at his face. Did one of them have a chip at the end? By golly it did.

He tugged off the cloak to show them it was him, and got twin hisses of, “Put that back on.”

Ignoring this, Harry hugged them. Then he put the cloak back on.

“I’ve been practicing my disillusionment charm,” he said quietly, after a few minutes to catch up and confirm identities with quick questions. Ron (Neville) was a little quiet, but Hermione made up for it with a babble of noise. “Who wants to be invisible and ride in the luggage racks?”

“Luggage racks?” Ron groaned.

“Luggage racks,” Harry agreed. “I’ve done it before, it’s easy to nap.”

This was a blatant lie, and his friends believed him. He loved his friends.

“Harry,” said Hermione, “I don’t think this is a good idea. Not after Diagon Alley. I wouldn’t have even come if there had been another way to reach you and another place to meet.”

“Next time – if – we get scattered, meet at Number 12,” Harry suggested. “It’s still under the Fidelius.”

“Probably a trap,” Ron grunted.

Harry glanced at him. Neville’s face was rather pale and clammy.

“What’s wrong, Ron?”

“He got cursed, Harry. We’re not sure what it is, and I have it confined to his arm, but it’s not... good. I’m actually looking forward to having access to the Hogwarts library to cure him.”

For a brief, shining moment, Harry thought about turning a problem over to Professor Snape and having the problem just go away. Then he shoved the memory to the side, and got on with business. Disillusionment and sneaking and hiding, because nothing made you feel better about your crusade than hiding from thugs and sneaking into your old school and not being sure you could win a straight fight with the most minor of your enemies.

Well, he could probably still beat Draco. That had to be a plus.

Harry did not end up dozing in his luggage rack, though he did end up brooding about what he was
going to do about Ron’s arm and Professor Snape. He’d done pretty well not thinking about
Professor Snape too much, but now – well. He’d seen this morning’s Prophet. Headmaster Snape.

Harry had thought he’d be far happier when Professor Snape became headmaster.

#

Harry slept, and dreamed of hiking somewhere abroad to look for someone with a weird name.

Sneaking off the train was trickier than sneaking onto it, and Harry now had luggage-shaped bruises.
What Harry had noticed, however, with a pleased sort of warm feeling, was that the Death Eaters
were undermanned. The train only had a few pairs of goons, plus Slytherin prefects roaming, and the
students seemed to have a parade of crying or questions or trick items to play.

Thankfully, Hermione was wonderful at confunding people, and they were all extremely invisible.

Duck through the great hall to the staircases, up one floor, across a long gallery to the second
staircase, up two floors – Hermione was leading and Harry was getting rapidly lost – across two
hallways of classrooms and into a dark classroom with model cars, muggle-style desks, and a
computer.

“I thought so,” Hermione said. Her polyjuice had worn off. “Muggle studies isn’t likely to be taught
this year, is it?”

It was weirdly like setting up camp in the forest. The same tent, the same wards, the same breathless
nerves until under cover.

Harry ducked into the tent, and ended up in their living room. It was dingy, with a brown tartan
couch, and smelled faintly of cats. It made Harry feel wistful for Arabella Figg’s house. Hermione
was hugging Ron, who was inspecting a hand that had turned black and grey, with faint hints of
ooze. Erk.

Harry perched on a chair arm and said, cautiously, “I’m sorry I got you both involved.”

“Harry!” Hermione protested. “We’d have been involved anyway, honestly. You’re not starting that
again, are you?”

“I didn’t think I’d really said it properly the first time.”

At which point Ron claimed dibs on choosing the topic of conversation because he was the one
whose arm wanted to fall off, and suggested Harry cough up a pain relief potion and some
cursebreaking ideas.

Harry coughed up – got out of his pockets – a pain relief potion, and said, “The best cursebreaking
idea I have is to ask Professor Snape to fix it.”

“No,” said Ron, flatly.

“Ron….”

“And have him do me in the way he did Dumbledore?”

Everyone took a collective breath at that one.

“Sorry,” Ron said, not sounding sorry at all. “But no thanks. I’d rather see what we can do.”
“Then I guess… library, Hermione?” Harry asked.

Hermione nodded, looking worried. But Harry noticed she didn’t advocate going directly to Professor Snape for help. Harry had few certainties in his life – he was going to fight Voldemort again. Ron and Hermione were his friends. He loved Sirius. Professor Snape wanted him alive. Harry could not, however, honestly say that he thought Professor Snape particularly wanted Ron alive, so he held his tongue. The library might work.
There was a very simple and easy solution to the problem of food at Hogwarts. Rather than sneaking down to the Great Hall or kitchen or practicing idiotic summoning, Harry called for Dobby and requested supplies for their tent’s pantry cupboards. Predictably, Harry was cried on and praised and generally Dobby’d at.

Predictably, Hermione went overboard about the library. She didn’t just borrow (steal) books on dark curses, she borrowed (stole) the required textbooks for year seven classes.

“…why?” was the only thing Harry could think to ask.

“Haven’t you noticed how much time we have on our hands in between our planned stops?” she asked. “You and Ron get bored. I got copies of the class syllabi for potions, transfiguration, charms, and herbology too.”

“You thought Ron and I were bored, so you brought back… homework.”

This was so Hermione he could cry. All he could do was stare at her. It had made sense to trade off on the invisibility cloak rather than all three of them shuffling around with it. It had made sense that Hermione should go first because she was the one who knew what books they wanted to research Ron’s curse.

Why was it, when every step made sense, he was still left with a horrifying result?

“On the plus side,” Ron said weakly from where he was lying on the ratty brown couch, “I might be dying. Can’t do homework when I’m dying.”

“Don’t talk that way,” Hermione said briskly. “You’re not dying. I won’t let you.”

“Pretty sure we’re not supposed to mess with the natural cycle of life and death,” Harry pointed out.

“None of us are dying from anything as silly as the skin-melting curse,” she said firmly. “I’m almost certain that’s what this is, I just don’t know how it’s cured.”

Ron’s skin on his hand and arm certainly did look rather melted. Also blackened, weirdly bubbly, and Harry wasn’t thinking about it anymore. The charmed cloth tied around his upper arm had slowed the halt of the curse to a nearly impossible to see progressive darkening of the skin, so slowly did it move. They had time.

“What if we can’t cure it?” Ron asked worriedly.

“Then we kidnap Professor Snape and make him fix it, or make Madame Pomfrey fix it and erase her memory for her safety,” Hermione said. “I haven’t decided, it will depend on the details of the curse. Now, let me concentrate? You can catch up on the first week’s class schedule, they’re doing very interesting things in charms….”

Harry felt like he should be doing something useful. But the sun outside was shining brightly on the first day of term at Hogwarts, and he wasn’t able to turn weird crabbed writing about curses into an antidote….

Harry grabbed the seventh year potions syllabus and settled down against the wall to read. Maybe, if he figured out his cleansing elixir…. 
Harry had resisted the vision of Voldemort torturing the wandmaker Ollivander as well he could, last week, but he’d still seen enough to know that it had happened.

This time, he fell into Voldemort’s mind in the early morning, lulled to sleep the previous evening by Hermione’s muttering, Ron’s groaning, and the scratch of a quill on parchment. He’d had too little sleep this past week, sleeping under bushes and in treetops, with only a cloak and paranoia for company.

_He was walking along a mountain road in the cool blue light of dawn. Far below, swathed in mist, was the shadow of a small town. Was the man he sought down there, the man he needed so badly he could think of little else, the man who held the answer, the answer to his problem...?_

It looked quite foreign, Harry thought to himself, and wrapped his own mind in wings of fire to keep it closed from Voldemort.

_You were much better at occluding last year, _he commented.

_I was less angry last year, Harry._

_I don’t see why. You’ve got what you wanted, haven’t you? All sorts of power and things._

_You know what goal I have not yet achieved._

Harry had to think about it.

_You, Harry. I am doing my very best to kill you._

_I’m not in Germany or wherever that is._

_I am aware. You will stay on our fair islands. You will not abandon your home or your family._

_Then what are you doing there?_

_I need a wand with which to kill you. I am finding the correct wandmaker._

Well. That was disturbing.

_You’re not going to do wizarding Britain much good if you kill all the wandmakers._

_I do not plan to kill any of them. If they answer my questions politely, I shall not even harm them._

_What was that golden spell?_

_No idea, _Harry thought cheerfully.

Rage spiked pain through his mind, but it wasn’t his burning frustration, so that was okay.

_I miss speaking with you, Harry, _Voldemort thought/said. _Will you not open your mind to me?_

_If you wanted to talk to me, you shouldn’t have killed my aunt and uncle._

_Sentiment._

_Yep. I have a lot of sentiments. Going to be in Germany long?_

_I am not in Germany. How has your potions research progressed?_
I’m working on a new one, an original one. It’s harder without lab space or a teacher, but you have to do what you have to do.

I wish you the best of luck with its swift completion.

Why?

I should hate to see young talent cut short, its work unfinished.

You could just decide not to kill me.

You know that is the prophecy’s decision, not mine.

Harry hesitated a fraction too long.

He did tell it to you, Voldemort whispered venomously, pausing his downward climb towards the village. It rests waiting for me in your mind, if I simply… reach out….

I love Sirius, I love Hedwig, I love Professor Snape, I love Hermione and Ron and Dobby and even Dudley a little, I love Sirius….

Voldemort’s hiss of pain was really satisfying.

Sorry, Harry thought cheerfully. I’m not that helpless kid you can lead around by the nose these days. Have a great day! Try your best not to murder anyone.

And Harry woke up, to another sunny day at Hogwarts.
Interlude: Draco and McGonagall

Draco’s first full day back at Hogwarts had been long, exhausting, worrying and wonderful. No mother and father here to worry about, no Voldemort, no Voldemort, all the other students were scared stiff of him, he had Vince and Greg with him. He felt powerful, in control, admired, glorious.

He knew this conversation was going to be difficult. He had to have it anyway. He’d grown up a lot this summer, he knew about doing difficult things now.

Draco knocked on the door of Professor McGonagall’s office briskly.

“Come in,” she said.

She looked so much older than she had last spring, he thought. He’d noticed that about her at the feast, at their first class back. She’d been ignoring him both times, which he couldn’t fault her for. Her face grew stonier when she saw who it was.

“Mister Malfoy,” she said. “Did you have questions about our class today?”

“I need to talk to you.” She frowned, and he plowed on, “I need to talk to you about Professor Snape, Deputy Headmistress.”

“The headmaster is not your concern, Mister Malfoy,” she said. “If you do not have questions about class, I must ask you to leave.”

Draco turned and locked her door behind him with a spell, then took a seat in the chair opposite her desk. He was not particularly intimidated by Minerva McGonagall, even if her scowl was tremendous.

It hurt his heart, somewhere deep down inside. His lessons with her, his apprenticeship…. Focus, Draco.

“It is my job,” Draco said evenly, “To keep an eye on Professor Snape and make sure he is alright. I can’t do that job by myself, because I have classes to attend to and my prefect duties. I’m recruiting you.”

There wasn’t even coldness in her gaze, just the steel of a woman who wasn’t budging. Her lips pursed, but she said nothing.

Well, Draco had more to say, anyway.

“He’s usually fine,” Draco said with careful precision. “But sometimes he forgets where he is and what he’s doing. It’s bad when he’s in the middle of a complex spell or potion. It’s not something I can ask the Carrows to watch for, and they don’t know him well enough to catch it.”

Her eyes widened, ever so slightly. Good, Draco thought.

“I want to be very clear, Deputy Headmistress. If anything goes against the will of the Ministry at Hogwarts because he slipped, and you could have prevented that slip, it will not be him that pays the price, it will be the students. It’s all arranged.” Draco smiled, trying to put as much lazy arrogance as he could into the smile. “So it’s in your best interest, really.”

“What is in my best interest, Mister Malfoy?”
“Make sure everyone follows the rules. It’s really that simple.”

“Under whose authority?”

“Mine, if you need it. It’s common sense. You’re his rival, you should know what he’s like.”

“I know nothing about the headmaster. I thought I did, certainly, but I was incorrect.”

Oh, a crack on the armor. Fantastic.

“He hasn’t changed. He’s still the same person, just – confused. Sometimes.”

Her mouth opened slightly, and he couldn’t quite read the expression on her face.

“Mister Malfoy. What exactly are you implying?”

“…I don’t know, professor,” he said, allowing himself to frown in puzzlement. “I wasn’t actually trying to imply anything, I was trying to blackmail you.”

“That,” she said tartly, “Was apparent. If something is wrong with the headmaster, I want to understand the details, Mister Malfoy.”

“There’s nothing wrong with him,” Draco bristled.

“Draco Malfoy, get to the point.”

His spine stiffened in automatic reflex.

“I’ll get in trouble if I let him walk into doors or act strange in front of people,” he said. “But you’re not a gossip, so it’d be alright if you watched him sometimes.”

“If he was injured in battle, he should see a mediwitch.”

“It wasn’t-“ he hesitated.

“Speak up, boy,” she barked.

“It’s just – memory charms or something, I don’t know.”

“Multiple charms?”

“I think so. He’s always worse after the evenings. Um. He doesn’t remember, so I haven’t asked.”

“Beginning when?”

“I don’t think that’s relevant.”

This conversation was getting away from Draco, he realized with a sinking feeling, she had this fierce look in her eye that made him want to crawl under his chair.

“It is relevant if you want my help, Mister Malfoy. Beginning when?”

“…I don’t know,” he muttered, hunching his shoulders. “Maybe when he was kidnapped to trick Potter into going to the Department of Mysteries? I don’t know, honestly.”

Professor McGonagall turned away, pulled out a handkerchief, and dabbed at her eyes. Draco, terrified by this show of human weakness, froze in his chair and tried not to breath.
She turned back to him, expression composed once more.

“Much becomes clear,” she said briskly. “Very well. I will keep a close eye on the headmaster, Mister Malfoy, you may be assured of that.”

Draco was pretty sure that nothing had become clear at all, but he had his help, so….

“…good?”

“You are dismissed.”

Draco was out the door before he remembered that he was really the one in charge and he should have dismissed her. Oh, well. It was a work in progress.
It was Harry’s turn to explore the next day, and so it was he who discovered that they had made a few fundamental miscalculations in their plan to break into and out of Hogwarts. Really, it wasn’t surprising that the plan had some flaws, but Harry had expected the flaws to be less glaringly obvious.

1. Muggle Studies was a compulsory class, this year, he found when he left the classroom they’d been in and walked by a first-year class full of angry eleven-year-olds who were protesting that they didn’t think that made sense, really, they’d never been hurt by muggles. The new teacher looked incredibly suspicious.

2. The secret passages out of the school were warded and guarded by Death Eaters, every single one of them that Harry knew about.

3. There were regular patrols of the hallways by scruffy, evil-looking types. Harry wanted to know where Voldemort was getting all these people. He’d come back from the dead with only a little over a dozen wizard supporters, hadn’t he? But he’d broken open Azkaban prison, Harry had heard – maybe he just recruited all the murderers and dark wizards he found in there. Wonderful

4. It was going to be much harder than Harry thought to keep his temper, he thought darkly as he turned onto the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom level and heard Neville’s voice, loud and brave, and then a sickening scream. He couldn’t charge in there, he had a plan, he had work to do, he couldn’t go rescuing everyone with his saving people thing. The scream stopped. Harry closed his eyes, held very still, and thought about why people became murderers.

“We’ve got to move,” he told Hermione and Ron half an hour later, after he’d completed his first sweep of the castle, narrowly avoiding a few patrols using the Map, and not encountered any familiar-cozy feelings of evil. (Why did evil feel cozy, anyway?) “They haven’t canceled Muggle Studies, they’ve just made it awful. We need to pack up and… camp in the Room of Requirement, I suppose.

Ron groaned from the couch. Harry managed to make out, “…cats…”

“That’s right, Ron,” Harry said bracingly. “It won’t smell at all like cats. Up you get.”

“Harry, shouldn’t we wait until after dark?” asked Hermione.

“No,” he said, “We should use some of my invisibility chews and the cloak both and really make ourselves scarce. Better blind tomorrow than caught today, right?”

“At some point we aren’t going to be able to solve all our problems by turning invisible,” Hermione pointed out, but she got started on packing up and levering Ron to his feet.

Harry was quiet as they packed and prepared themselves for travel, quiet because he was thinking. There was something about solving your problems by being invisible, about the way the school had fought Umbridge so passive-aggressively two years ago… an idea that was positively Marauder-worthy. He thought about it as they skirted their way cautiously through mostly-deserted corridors, avoiding patrols and Miss Norris all the way to the seventh floor. How did you hide something invisible?

Since Hermione was supporting Ron, Harry walked up and down the seventh floor corridor, concentrating. A camping place, hidden, unplottable, with an invisible door, only accessible by direct
invitation by him, Hermione, or Ron, a soaring tree, a hidden library – he let his mind veer between ideas, holding it open to possibilities. Someplace grand, someplace safe, someplace reassuring.

The door was simple round wood, painted green. Harry opened it, and gestured Hermione and Ron inside.

The floor was carpeted in grass, and a wooden building shaped like a tree filled the center of the clearing. It wasn’t an actual tree, it was too gnarled for that, but it seemed like it might have been a tree once, twisted and ancient, before someone had hollowed it out and added floors – and a balcony up there on one of the old stumps of branches. Harry wondered what he’d been thinking of to inspire that.

There was, he realized with pleasure, room to play a game of Quidditch in here, under the distant not-a-real-blue-sky. Maybe he’d been thinking about Quidditch?

Harry finally remembered to close the door behind them.

The first floor was a lounge area and kitchen, very similar to their tent. The second floor, up a twisted, narrow spiral staircase, was a library which made Hermione exclaim in delight over – books on cursebreaking, dark magic, and general defense. Yes, please.

They continued up the stairs to the next floor, which had two half-circle bedrooms, both decorated in Gryffindor red.

“You know there are three of us, mate?” Ron asked, having come awake enough to comment.

Harry said nothing about curly-haired babies. His subconscious could go take a hike. He glanced between the rooms and said, “I think this one’s mine, it has the balcony. Um. Sorry.”

Harry was not actually sorry. Harry tried to look innocently invisible.

“Boys,” was her scathing comment, and by the sound of it she went to help Ron lay down in the big bed in the other room.

Harry knew grinning was not the correct reaction right now, so he decided the better part of valor was ducking upstairs to see what the final level was. It was, to his delight, a compact but fully-equipped potions lab, complete with four big windows for air circulation, a slate floor, and three benches. There was even a cupboard of potions ingredients, though they were pretty universally weird or ancient. They melted away as he dismissed their usefulness. Sure, someday he might have a need for that many spider webs, but not today.

“Hermione,” he asked thin air in the library (on the theory that Hermione was predictable and they were all still invisible), as he was heading downstairs to unpack the tent, “Two things. Can I have the tent to get some food out, and how important would you say being able to see is to learning magic?”

“Very important. Why?”

She was sitting in an armchair by a window with a book open in her invisible lap, he saw. Very predictable.

“I was thinking about how to hide a few invisible people in a giant castle. So… how hard is it to tell one invisible person from another?”

“We are not sharing your invisibility candy with the student body.”
“I don’t see why not. The ingredients are easy to get, the potion doesn’t take long to brew, and it makes them harder to hit.”

“Harder to hit?”

“The new defense teacher practices curses on the students.”

Hermione was silent. Harry decided to leave her to mull it as he headed downstairs.
Harry and Hermione probably would have fallen down the research hole and not come out for three days or until whatever they needed to cure Ron had been discovered, except Ron wasn’t having it. Over a dinner of roast beef and peas from the Hogwarts kitchens, delivered by an excited Dobby, Ron had spared both Hermione and Harry a glare and a slightly incoherent lecture on focus and horcruxes and war.

Harry, who felt rather like he should have more focus than his friend who was busy trying to be tough about having his arm attempt to fall off, hurriedly said, “Well, we’ve got to worry about the Hufflepuff cup, the snake, something of Ravenclaw’s, and finding the Sword before it can be turned into a Horcrux. Hermione, anything in the books about what it might be of Ravenclaw’s?”

“I’ve been a little busy,” Hermione snarled from behind her giant book of curses.

“Books aren’t usually how I get information,” Harry said, trying to be placating. “I like talking to people and asking them questions.”

“Then do that.”

Hermione, Harry thought, was not in a good mood. He’d just… go out. Yes. He’d go out and question people.

Neither of his friends prevented this exodus, which was probably not good for anyone, because what did Harry see when he stepped into the corridor? A white cat, sitting with intent expression and downward tilted whiskers, staring right at Harry’s invisible self.

The cat pounced on his feet in a whirl of fur and pain.

“Shove off, Draco,” Harry hissed. “Or I’ll curse you blue.”

The cat swatted his ankle with claws extended, before backing off. Being invisible, Harry thought ruefully, did not make him impossible to smell. Harry really should have checked the Map before venturing outside.

Draco shifted human and said in a hurried, furious hiss, “Are you crazy? Are you trying to die? Are you trying to get us killed? Merlin, Harry, what are you doing here?”

“Looking for the sword of Gryffindor.”

“Well, let me tell you something, Potter, you brilliant – you – it’s in my aunt’s Gringott’s vault. Which if you’d just found a way to ask me, I could have told you. Why do you want it, anyway?”

“Not going to let Death Eaters get their hands on it, am I?” Harry muttered defensively. “It’s powerful magic.”

“You are not going to defeat the Dark Lord with a magic sword,” Draco hissed. “I hate you so much. Do you know how much danger you’re putting everyone in?”

“Tough,” Harry said shortly. “We’ve all got jobs to do.”

“Don’t tell me, I don’t want to know. Don’t.”

There was something awful and fragile in Draco’s tone of voice.
“Alright,” Harry whispered. “Let’s get out of sight and talk, okay?”

He dragged Draco unresisting into an alcove.

“So… how was your summer?”

Draco started laughing, soft and bitter and unending. Harry hit him in the shoulder, lightly.

“Calm down. No one’s going to die, I’m just going to… cause a little trouble.”

“I’m in charge of preventing trouble.”

Harry considered this.

“Sorry,” he said, without much hope of being convincing.

“I hate you so much.”

“Mm. How’s Luna doing?”

“You heard about that.”

“His Snakiness and I still have the occasional chat, though he doesn’t get a front row seat to my thoughts anymore.”

“His – what.”

“Saying his name these days brings a squad down on your head, and I’m not calling him lord anything. Catchy, isn’t it?”

Draco looked up to the sky in placation of whatever deity made this his life.

“Luna,” he said distantly after a moment, “Is disturbed, but probably not irrevocably damaged. She seems to be plotting something with the girl Weasley and Longbottom.”

“Huh.”

That reminded Harry – a quick spell summoned his DA coin from his pocket.

The DA was meeting in the Room of Requirement tomorrow night. The room Harry as camped in. That… wasn’t great. Harry didn’t trust the whole DA enough to let him in to the space or the secret of Harry’s being around. Harry didn’t think the Room could be two things at once, could it?

If the sword was in the LeStrange vault, could one of the other horcruxes be there too? They were not, they’d agreed, going to have time to rob two vaults, if it came down to it.

More to the point at the present moment, if Harry wanted to be confident enough to talk to anyone he didn’t absolutely have to, people vulnerable to mind reading, he and Ron and Hermione needed to be ready to move with an escape plan by tomorrow night.

“Good chat, Draco,” Harry said. “I have some stuff to do, so… run along?”

“Run along.”

“Mhmm.”

“I’m going to kill you someday, Potter,” Draco said, but flickered into cat shape and left with what
seemed like a very insulting flick of his tail.

The countercharm to the skin melting curse was beyond Harry or Hermione, and Ron was in no shape to attempt it, but the nice thing about charms and potions was that what one could do with one, one could generally do with the other, with a little bit of creativity and translation. It only took one trip down to the potions classrooms to steal stuff and six hurried tries over a sleepless night and day for a potion that made Ron’s arm turn a weird shade of green but cease hurting and cease looking like a zombie plague.

“I may have turned your arm into part tree,” Harry said, looking at the green skin with concern. “Er. I think I shouldn’t have used so many mungbeans?”

“I’ll take it,” Ron said. “I really thought I was a goner there for a while. So what if I have plant skin now?”

Harry rather thought Ron should object to having plant skin, but they were in a hurry, and once he’d had a chance to fill Hermione and Ron in on the lack of secret passages out of the school they were also all feeling jumpy and trapped behind the anti-apparition wards. They had things to do, they couldn’t just stay here and torment teachers.

Though they all wanted to torment teachers, very much.

Which led, over afternoon tea brought by Dobby and enjoyed by a newly re-armed Ron, a jittery Harry and a Hermione falling asleep over her biscuits, to a very awkward conversation.

“So,” Harry said, stirring extra sugar into his tea with a little shiny silver spoon. “We’ve never really talked about being at war.”

“What d’you mean?” asked Ron around a big mouthful of scone with cream. (Ron was catching up on his meals.)

“I mean… I’m going to have to kill Vol-.”

"Harry!” yelped Ron.

Harry scowled at himself.

"I'm going to have to kill his snakiness, but what about the rest of his Death Eaters? Do we stun them, or… we’ve just done memory charms so far because we didn’t want to be obtrusive, but someday we’re going to have to actually – fight, won’t we?”

“You’re not talking about using Unforgivables,” Ron said.

“No, no, but – well. I know a cutting curse, and that curse that Krum used on the dragon during the Tasks. I’m sure we all know stuff like that. I just… I heard the Defense teacher hurting one of the students, and…”

And I wanted to kill them. I’ve never wanted to kill anyone except Voldemort before, and that’s always been pretty abstract because he’s immortal and basically a snake. It’s not killing a person.

“We don’t exactly have Azkaban,” Harry concluded uneasily. “Or aurors to turn them over to.”

An uneasy silence fell.
“…I don’t think Charlie and Bill just stun,” Ron said, after a while, scone forgotten. “Fred and George do, because they were in the DA, but… they didn’t exactly talk about it in front of us, but I think the Order….”

“They fought to stun in the Department of Mysteries,” Harry said, trying to remember.

“But that’s different, innit?” Ron asked. “They had to worry about getting arrested by the Ministry for using curses and killing people. It’s different now.”

Harry wished, abruptly, that he and Ron and Hermione had joined the Order in due time, formally, the way Fred and George had. There was probably a lecture or explanation by Moody about this. Something sensible and brutal, the way Moody had explained the casualties of the first war to Harry as a comforting aside. The silence lengthened again, and seemed to deepen until Harry sipping his tea sounded loud and obnoxious.

“It is better,” Hermione quoted, “To use a minor spell which one may depend on in defense, than to rely upon a major spell which may fail. Defensive Magical Theory, Chapter One. We aim to stun or disarm. We’ve all got it down where we can do it wordlessly and almost wandlessly. Do either of you think you can get comfortable enough with really – really violent curses – to use them in a duel?”

Harry let out a breath he hadn’t known he was holding.

“No,” he said more confidently. “No, I’d flub it somehow. So we stun.”

Ron nodded, looking equally relieved. Harry had to admit, he was happy Hermione had given him a justification for that. He’d so much prefer if the only person he had to kill was Voldemort. One could feel really certain about killing Voldemort. If he thought about killing Mr. Malfoy, he had to think about Mrs. Malfoy and Draco being miserable, even if Mr. Malfoy probably deserved it for being an evil, terrorist git.

They were ready to meet the DA.
It was Ron’s day with the invisibility cloak, though he hadn’t had much chance to use it, so it was Ron who went outside to greet the DA and invite them in for a little chat. Harry and Hermione, who had just finished getting over a bout of blindness and were feeling jumpy as anything, waited just inside the door.

First through the door was Neville, who surprised both Harry and Hermione with hugs. Next came Luna, pale and strangely pristine in tidy robes with straight hair, eyes hidden behind narrow wire-rimmed glasses. She didn’t hug them, which Harry thought a blessing. An assortment of other members of the DA followed, and a general chatter ensued – they’d been certain, they said, that he’d be back to lead them against Voldemort, certain it would be okay, certain they would fight back.

Ron came in with Ginny at the end, and Harry was struck by her beauty and by her expression, fierce and vibrant and strange. She looked, he thought, like a warrior goddess. He shook his head, and tried to keep up with the various strands of excited and panicked conversation.

Ron whistled sharply.

“Settle down, everyone. We’re not really here, you’re just having a regular DA meeting. Mum’s the word, right?”

Neville nodded.

“No one here will say anything to Snape or the Carrows,” he said firmly.

“I didn’t think you would,” said Harry. “We three won’t be able to stay here for long – too much chance of getting caught – but we thought we should swing by to help you all cause trouble. And,” he added dryly, “Hermione wanted to pick up study guides.”

This caused some lightening of the mood, which had been his intention. The DA meeting proceeded mostly according to the usual routine, splitting up by house and practicing the spell of the day – disillusionment charms, today. Harry was beginning to think there were never too many ways to be invisible. They'd lost their two Slytherins, not that Harry was exactly surprised.

Harry took the Ravenclaws, as previously agreed with his friends, and so it was with studied casualness that he asked, “I’ve been looking for Gryffindor’s sword – part of why we’re here – but I realized I didn’t know if the other founders left something like that behind. What about Ravenclaw?”

“Well, there’s the lost diadem of Ravenclaw,” Luna said, pulled out of whatever world she was wandering in her mind. “Daddy’s trying to duplicate it.”

The conversation proceeded briskly from there with little prompting from Harry, though midway through the Ravenclaws seemed to catch on he wasn’t asking for his health. He donned the invisibility cloak to go with Luna to the Ravenclaw common room.

“…I heard about your summer,” Harry said quietly as they walked. “I’m sorry.”

Luna had developed an elegant glide, and a pleasantly neutral expression. Harry hated it.

“It’s alright, Harry,” she said gently. “I promise I won’t help them.”

“I never thought you would!”
“I never thought Gregory would,” she said thoughtfully, “But people can surprise you.”

Well. That was horribly awkward.

“You should avoid him, Harry,” she continued quietly. “He’s very confused right now, and I should hate for you to have to hurt him.”

“He hasn’t… really….”

“He thinks that the Dark Lord has won and that we must be practical.”

“And… you?”

“I am not a very practical person,” she said, with a little bit of her old lightness.

“Good,” Harry grinned. “Me neither. Very impractical, that’s me.”

Luna giggled softly, and they walked the rest of the way in more peace than awkwardness, only having to double back twice to avoid patrols. The diadem of Ravenclaw was a handsome tiara, Harry saw, and that told him… basically nothing. He’d never seen anything like it before in his life.

Harry got back to the Room of Requirement in the middle of an argument. Ginny was saying she was going to call Fred and George to fight, and Ron was yelling and Hermione was pale.

“Oy!” Harry shouted. “What’s going on?”

“We were arguing about the Carrows,” Ron reported. “They’re awful, but….”

But the horcruxes. But the war.

“Right,” Harry said. “Tactics and strategy is Hermione’s job. If you all want to join our team to fight his snakiness, that is. We’re not the Order, we don’t have an age limit.”

Some of the DA agreed to join. Some said they just wanted to keep learning to protect themselves. The latter, Harry sent on their way.

“Right,” Harry said again, after the group had narrowed to people he trusted – the usual suspects and a few others. “Hermione?”

“We can’t fight the Carrows yet,” Hermione said. “That is, we can’t win against them yet. You all… the Death Eaters weakness is that there aren’t very many of them. We have to tie up as many as we can at Hogwarts, because there are so many students here, we have the advantage of numbers. If we make tormenting them a game… the way we dealt with Umbridge… that’s less Death Eaters out on the streets hunting muggleborn and the Order. I’m sorry. It’s not fair, I know that, but that’s what you can do now, this year. You said they weren’t willing to really hurt you? You’re the only ones that can say that right now.”

The DA was silent and uneasy. Harry shifted, and tried, “Not that we won’t help. I’ve got some ideas, potions… tricks to try, ways to avoid detection. And three portable swamps, actually, come to think of it. The best prank’s the one you don’t have to be there for, right?”

Which gave Harry a beautiful, magical idea. It’d be a way to tell Professor Snape something without confronting him, too, and Harry desperately wanted to talk to the man, if only indirectly.

And get a mild sort of revenge, in the bargain.
Being invited to join a guerrilla warfare effort seemed to soothe the DA’s spirits, and the evening turned into a pleasant round of butterbeer, plans to trap and release pixies, ways to shield the lower years from the worst of it while still inspiring them towards rebellion, and plans for after the war (which mostly consisted of laughing while the Death Eaters rotted in Azkaban).
Pranks and Potions

Having done the most immediately pressing of their tasks at Hogwarts, Harry, Ron, and Hermione were stuck with still being at Hogwarts. In a way it was too comfortable – they had friends sneaking by for a chat, pranks to plan, study guides to follow. Neville even asked Professors McGonagall and Flitwick which charms and transfigurations were safe to practice without adult supervision, in case of accident. They caught up on food and sleep, and Harry practiced hopping down from progressively higher heights as he concentrated on the feeling of flying.

He also did some potion brewing, over the next peaceful week. On Saturday morning, before breakfast, he assembled his troops in the Great Hall.

“Ewe and Ram,” he addressed the two piles of soapsuds with brown eyes and active baa’ing. “Your job is to make sure everything is very sparkly. Especially the headmaster’s office, the defense classrooms, and the muggle studies classrooms. Remember, gentle but firm. Don’t let them make the place all messy.”

He checked the Map for early-morning breakfasters, then addressed two golden-brown potions shaped like frogs. “Shine and Polish, your job is to make sure everyone in the school has very clean shoes. Don’t be afraid to trip Professor Snape if he’s stubborn.”

He was probably over-doing this, but whatever.

“Glorious and Beautiful, Lock and Tress,” he addressed four bouncing green globes, “Just follow your instincts.” He paused and added, a little regretfully, “Try not to actually smother anyone.”

Right, who was he forgetting. Ah! The iridescent oil-slicks of the laundry potions he’d just finished.

“Iron and Pearl, treat every day as if the Minister was going to turn up. We want the school to look its best. Now, don’t get lost, don’t get hit by spells, and be brave and good and righteous. Go forth and clean up Hogwarts, my friends. Now – we want this to be a fun surprise, so let’s all hide under the staff table and wait until breakfast is served.”

Harry stood back at the edge of the Great Hall under disillusionment and his invisibility cloak, and waited for the music to start.

#

Breakfast was served. Professor Snape was just scooping up a bite of eggs when his chair was knocked over backwards by the force of an overenthusiastic sheep-inspired cleaning potion. Alecto and Amycus Carrow each took a hair care potion to the face.

Snape snapped, “Finite incantatum,” and it was music to Harry’s ears, because he’d solved that problem very thoroughly. The potions didn’t relent until Alecto’s hair was piled in an elegant spiraling updo and Amycus’s beard was styled prettily.

Which had given the other potions time to work, and beautiful chaos ensued. Harry would treasure Draco Malfoy being aggressively laundered for a very long time.

The Carrows, naturally, threw curses. His potions, which had fast reflexes, dodged them, and then dodged into the mass of students. The rest of the staff table, the ones not being enthusiastically cleaned, seemed struck dumb by this massive cleaning effort.
Professor Snape swirled around snapping orders, and Harry’s potions scattered under tables, out doors, and behind students. Harry saw Ginny hiding a golden-brown frog in her bag. There was one casualty – either Iron or Pearl – but that was alright. Harry had just wanted to make his point.

Professor Snape looked panicked and furious. And, of course, stylish. Harry rather thought his point was made.

#

The Ravenclaw ghost confirmed the tiara had passed through the hands of Lord Voldemort. They knew what all the horcruxes were – now they just had to find them.

#

The Carrows, understandably unamused by their new role as potion plaything, took it out on everyone around them. This had the pleasant and unpleasant side effect of torpedoing their popularity – not that they had much to begin with – into the negative numbers.

“Are you trying to give Professor Snape a heart attack?” Draco snarled at Harry, when Harry was leaning disillusioned out the window of a high tower to watch one of his potions lead a Carrow on a merry chase.

“He’s really not my priority,” Harry said, after a reflexive check of his Map.

“…he’s not.”

“No. Why would he be?”

“You are Harry Potter, aren’t you?”

“Probably. If I were to make him my priority, Malfoy, I’d never get anything done. So maybe it’s my turn to make his life difficult for a change.”

“I could turn you in.”

“…you could,” Harry allowed, turning to face Draco, who was rather red in the face. “I don’t see how it would benefit you at this point.”

“It might keep me from having to hide from getting my hair braided.”

“I thought that was quite stylish.”

Draco growled at him.

“What are you doing here, Potter?”

“Right now? Figuring out a way to leave without getting killed. You may have noticed, but they’ve stepped up their patrol patterns a little.”

“A little,” Draco said dryly. “You could say that, yes.”

You couldn’t go very far in the castle anymore without tripping over Death Eaters. Being invisible hiding under an invisibility cloak was really quite reassuring. It was getting to the point that Harry found it strange to be visible, even in his own temporary bedroom.

“I’ll try to come up with a way out for you,” Draco said. “Why’d you come, really?”
“I lost Hermione and Ron and this was our only agreed meeting place.”

“We’re all doomed,” Harry heard Draco muttering to himself as he wandered off.

Harry was not entirely sure he disagreed. A couple weeks at Hogwarts hadn’t done much for their quest, and the sheer number of Death Eaters to avoid was nearly terrifying. Provoking the new teachers into viciousness was going well, but he really almost wished it wasn’t.

He headed back to the Room of Requirement, to work on invisibility potions.

#

The solution came to him on the night of the full moon, as he wondered how Remus was doing and remembered the first time he’d ever seen a Wolfsbane potion. Remus had complained about the taste, because it was ruined by sugar….

Harry called Dobby and asked him to bring a selection of baking supplies from the kitchen. This was a job for sugar-free treats. Sugar would absolutely interfere with an invisibility potion, he didn’t know what he’d been thinking. A nice caramelized flour recipe was obviously the way to go. Granted, they wouldn’t be as tasty or as chewy, but the ingredients were cheap and the potential chaos was beautiful.

This was how Hogwarts came down with a plague of invisible, coughing children, complaining with open glee that they just didn’t feel well, could they go the hospital wing? Harry felt a little warm glow when he left the recipe with the DA for production.
It wasn’t, Draco thought tiredly, that they couldn’t handle a castle full of annoying brats. Even a castle full of invisible annoying brats was possible, once Professor Snape had brewed an antidote to the invisibility potion everyone seemed to be taking, with an addition that made it taste like you were dying and dyed your lips blue. Draco could handle portable swamps in three of the main corridors, he knew how to turn water into ice, after all.

It was that the lunatics seemed to not care if they got caught. He cared, he’d been trying to avoid noticing this particular group’s (fifth years; stupid Gryffindor fifth years) idiocy all morning. But, no, they had to actually try to get him with some mix of black goo and feathers. It had been a good opportunity to practice his transfiguration – the feathers were quite pretty as stone and he was keeping one – but now he had a group of crying fifth years trying to cheer each other up while chained to the floor and he just couldn’t.

“Look, Stace, our cell’s definitely going to win this week’s competition,” one boy said to a crying girl and Draco wheeled on them, glaring.

“What competition?” he demanded.

Three stubborn faces glared back at him.

“You’ll answer soon enough once the Deputy Headmaster gets here,” Draco said flatly. The Carrows were not competent at many aspects of their job, but they were competent interrogators.

All he got was stony silence. He glanced at his elegant white marble feather.

“What was the point of the feathers?” he asked.

A short, jumbled explanation later – apparently this wasn’t a secret – Draco said slowly, “So this was muggle filth.”

Tar and feathers. Really. Maybe he wouldn’t regret them being tortured after all.

(He would.)

And there, finally came the tap of shoes that signaled the Deputy Headmistress, Lady Alecto, and, hm. Professor Snape. Draco summoned up a smile from somewhere.

“Three more to be disciplined, Deputy Headmistress. They do like acting in groups of three, don’t they? I think they get it from muggle ‘films.’”

“Well?” she asked. “Get on with it, I know you know how.”

“You don’t want to know what they did, Professor Carrow?”

“At this point I don’t care,” she gritted out. Her hair, Draco noted, was braided into an elegant topknot, a key sign she’d encountered a haircare potion already this morning. It wasn’t even lunchtime. Delightful. “From now on, prefects are delegated the authority to punish disruptive behavior on the spot. Do you understand me, Malfoy?”

Draco swiveled, catching Professor Snape’s dark gaze for a moment, raised his wand at the girl who’d been snivelling, cleared his mind of everything but deep, seething fury and the wish to cause
pain, and cast the Cruciatus.

#

After, when all three of the students were crying and his part in it was done, Draco just stared at them for a while. He wasn’t actually sure what their names were. He was entirely sure he didn’t care.

“Draco, with me,” Professor Snape ordered, from where he’d been watching. Draco fell in beside him as Professor Snape swept through the main corridor and staircase, reversing trap hexes and pranks left in their path as he went, without comment or notice.

“Sir, what’s this about?” Draco asked, after the first flight of stairs. “We’re missing lunch.”

“You are not hungry,” Professor Snape observed.

Draco blinked. It was true, but he wasn’t sure why Professor Snape knew that.

“Sir, is this about-“

“Hold your tongue,” Professor Snape snarled. “Unless you think that this school’s recent penchant for invisible eavesdroppers does not apply to you.”

Draco fell back into thinking about the siren song of pain. It was such an interesting curse, the cruciatus. He hadn’t liked it at all at first, but now….

“Phoenix tears,” Professor Snape told a gargoyle, and led Draco into the headmaster’s office. Draco took the seat Professor Snape pointed out, and waited while the headmaster busied himself with a few things.

Finally, Professor Snape stood and looked at him, eyes hooded.

“What do you think you are playing at, Draco?”

“Sir?”

“You are not a spy. You are a barely competent assistant. You are not a brave resistance fighter. You are not a powerful or talented occlumens.”

Draco opened his mouth to protest this brutal character assessment.

“Be silent,” Professor Snape continued. “You are a child, and you are becoming lost in the dark. Am I incorrect?”

Draco looked down at his hands, which were trembling, and looked up again in sudden fury, “As if you’re any better, sir? Do you know what day it is? Why you’re doing what you’re doing? At least I’m of my own mind!”

“Hold your tongue.”

“You just want to stop me,” Draco said, because it was so clear, wasn’t it. “You’re confused and you think we’re not on the same side. That’s alright, I can fix you.”

“I,” Snape breathed, “Am many things. Your headmaster, your professor, even your mentor in the Dark Arts, but I am not and have never in your memory been a child in need of protection. I am not the one in danger here, Draco. You are.”
Draco blinked at him.

“You will go to Potter,” Professor Snape said, as if saying nothing of import. “You will tell him you think you are losing yourself to the thrall of dark magic, and that he must help you escape this place. You will bring with you a bribe, for his help, that you will only give to him once he takes you from this place and reunites you with your parents.”

Professor Snape was a very surprising person. Where had this man, quiet and deadly and terrifying, been all summer?

“A bribe, sir?”

Professor Snape went to a shelf and took down a battered old hat. The Sorting Hat?

“Potter will find it pleasing enough to do as he is told,” Professor Snape said.

Draco accepted the hat, but didn’t get up to run off on his new quest.

“Who will look after you, sir?”

“If you had been born into a different family, I do believe you might have been a kind child,” Professor Snape said in tones of mild surprise. “Kind children need to remember to care about themselves, first.”

“I care about myself!”

Professor Snape gave him a very level look, then went and sat down, steepling his fingers together.

“Draco. If it would end this war, I would kill you in a heartbeat. I am not the previous occupant of this office. I care very little for the state of your soul. If, by putting my mind, my heart, and my life into the fight, I can end it, I will do so with no regret. You are doing me the discourtesy of thinking me weak, and you will desist. I know exactly what I am doing.”

There was no vagueness, no hint of anything but steel in the quiet voice and his professor’s dark eyes.

Draco tried, “I’m useful here.”

“No. You are not. You are a distraction. Spare me your schoolboy fantasies of grandeur.”

Finally, Draco ran out of words.

“You are dismissed.”

Draco went, hiding the hat in his robes as he went down the stairs to the exit. He was not, he thought fiercely, close to tears. That was just the aftereffects of magic, making his emotions volatile.

Fine. He’d find Harry and give him a stupid hat. Fine.
Harry, a good Marauder’s week of work done, had decided to take a day to himself to play chess with Ron, talk about fairy tales with Hermione, and do a couple trials of his cleansing elixir, which tasted like air and seemed to have no particular effects at all.

Harry hadn’t precisely been surprised to be told that Draco was lurking outside that particular evening and expected to be let in to talk to him and the group, but he had rather hoped to avoid Draco a little longer. Seeing Draco king of the castle again, minions at hand, with Professor Snape as his evil mentor… it was hard to think ‘these people are just pretending to be this awful.’ Wasn’t it more likely they were just pretending to be nice for some strange Slytherin reason? Oh, he didn’t really think it was so, but the possibility gnawed at him.

Still, he hadn’t come this far by not trusting his friends, so Harry went and invited Draco inside to catch up on events and learn what everyone had been up to.

It was going quite well until they decided to compare notes on Professor Snape.

“Now, Professor Dumbledore was under a death curse, which is why Professor Snape killed him, to spare him suffering.” Hermione explained.

“No, Professor Snape’s under mind control spells of some kind,” Draco corrected, “He’s absolutely under the Dark Lord’s thrall.”

“But he gave you the Sword of Gryffindor,” Hermione said impatiently, “And didn’t turn you in. That doesn’t sound like thrall to me.”

“I know the signs of mind altering magic when I see it!”

They stared at each other in consternation.

Harry said slowly, thoughtfully, “He told me years ago not to ever waste time trying to figure out his motivations, and that next time I tried to divine his motives he’d hang me upside down and skin me. So let’s move on, shall we?”

“But how are we supposed to plan around him if we don’t know what he’s trying to do,” Hermione half-wailed.

Harry’s scar took this moment to blaze with pain, as he fell across an abyss of anticipation into Voldemort’s mind.

He was gliding along a twilit street. The buildings on either side of him had high, timbered gables; they looked like gingerbread houses. He approached one of them, then saw the whiteness of his own long-fingered hand against the door. He knocked. He felt a mounting excitement ...

The door opened: A laughing woman stood there. Her face fell as she looked into Harry’s face: humor gone, terror replacing it ....

#

He raised his hand. She screamed. Two young children came running into the hall.

Don’t! Harry cried.
There was a flash of red light, and again. The woman and her children fell. Red light, not green?

Ah, Harry. Give me a reason not to.

I don’t have anything you want.

On the contrary, you have many things I want.

I don’t have anything you want I’m willing to give you.

What about conversation?

…you’re not serious. Harry couldn’t see how he could be serious.

I ended our little talks because I needed to be sure you would not pass anything along to Albus Dumbledore. This is no longer a concern, and I find I miss them.

Merlin, Harry thought to himself, as Voldemort’s pale hand pointed his wand at the youngest child. Merlin.

Ah, well, Voldemort thought lightly. I shall have to entertain myself.

Wait, thought Harry. I have conditions.

This did not immediately restart the killing spree.

You tell me your real reason for wanting to talk to me. I’m not telling you anything useful. I’m not seeking these little chats out, they’ll happen when they happen, and I don’t care if it’s not often.

I find that I am somewhat less impulsive when I am less bored, Voldemort thought with cool amusement. I noted a marked difference in my behavior during the year I spoke with you and the year I did not.

By impulsive do you mean murderous?

As it happens, yes.

Ugh.

Are we agreed, Harry?

Sure. Fine. Leave them alone.

Certainly. Good night.

And Harry was pushing himself away from the table where he’d slumped, looking at Hermione and Draco’s pale faces.

“You said that didn’t happen anymore!” hissed Draco.

“He can’t get into my mind, I sometimes wander around in his,” Harry snapped. “Shut up, my head hurts.”

Headache potion, headache potion….

“Any clues?” asked Ron, pulling out a notebook.
“Dunno, he’s still looking for that wandmaker someplace foreign,” Harry said.

“Describe the place.”

Harry obediently told Ron details, as Ron wrote them down in his little notebook. Harry thought Ron’s little notebook was seriously cute, but Harry decided not to say that aloud. He didn’t say anything about the kids or the agreement, either. His friends didn’t need that set of nightmares.

“We got on with talking while you were unconscious,” Ron told him kindly. “Draco here won’t give up the hat unless we get out of Hogwarts. Says Snape told him not to.”

“That’s great,” Harry says dryly. “Except for the part where we only brought three broomsticks and we’re lucky to step a couple feet out into the corridor without running into a patrol of six men.”

“Maybe if you hadn’t started a war in the corridors there’d be less people out trying to put it down,” Draco said waspishly.

“Why’s Snape want you out of here, anyway?” Harry asked. “He’s not chucking anyone else out of the school.”

Draco looked away.


“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Could be important,” said Ron.

“It’s not relevant,” Draco snarled.

“But-“ said Ron.

“Enough,” interrupted Harry. “We’ll figure out how to get out of the castle tomorrow, it’s late. Let’s get some sleep, everyone.”

The conversation continued, but it was lighter, easier to deal with. Harry’s headache faded through the combined effort of potions and friendship and food. Draco was jumpy and a little strange, and Harry noted with unease that his eyes were smoke-grey, rather than their usual pale unreadable shade. He thought about Sirius, whose eyes were a matching smoke-grey, and a conversation they’d had about dark magic.

#

Despite Harry’s promise to Draco to figure out a way out of Hogwarts, he did not think very hard upon the matter the next day. His cleansing elixir had now caught his attention, and once they were on the move again who knew when he’d have another chance to brew it. The idea of being able to cleanse the taint of dark magic from someone… oh, Draco didn’t say that was what was wrong with him, but Harry could almost taste it on the air around him, and he’d heard from Neville and Ginny and Luna about what Draco had been doing, these past months. Nothing good, or clean, or pure.

He was in the middle of another batch of elixir, trying human tears of laughter, when reality shifted around him.

"Give it to me, Gregorovitch."

Harry's voice was high, clear, and cold, his wand held in front of him by a long-fingered white hand.
The man at whom he was pointing was suspended upside down in midair, though there were no ropes holding him; he swung there, invisibly and eerily bound, his limbs wrapped about him, his terrified face, on a level with Harry's ruddy due to the blood that had rushed to his head. He had pure-white hair and a thick, bushy beard: a trussed-up Father Christmas.

Harry thought waspishly, I have a potion brewing that you've just ruined, hoping to distract Voldemort, but Voldemort declined to be distracted and continued his interrogation.

Harry, who didn’t think yelling at the top of his lungs counted as conversation, watched with deep apathy. He was getting far too jaded about witnessing torture and murder, really.

A scream that went on and on and then a burst of green light-

Voldemort put his wand away and thought, Now, Harry. What potion were you working on?

You can’t honestly expect me to make conversation after that.

I have no interest in anyone else following this trail, Harry. Surely Severus has taught you something of pragmatism?

Not that kind of pragmatism.

He spoils you. No matter. Tell me about your potion.

Harry sighed internally.

It’s going to be my masterwork potion, my original work, once it’s done. Its components are unicorn hair, moonwater, pennyroyal, rue, and tears.

They blinked.

How very insipid.

Excuse me?

Magic based on love and remorse and so on is usually insipid, of course, but that is beyond the pale. No component lends strength to it.

Harry thought about it, as Voldemort walked out into the night air and they felt the twist of apparition.

You've given me an idea, Harry said, when their vision cleared into a dark field. After all, I know the strongest thing that worked against you, for most of these years.

Blood and sacrifice. Not an entirely absurd proposition. It is too bad you will not have time to explore it, Harry.

They looked up from the grassy hill they’d been traversing at the towers and battlements of Hogwarts outlined against a starry sky, and Harry couldn’t breathe. He needed to wake up – but that, at least, he could not manage, not without a waver in Voldemort’s concentration. They continued to stroll leisurely towards the school, through the great gates, up past the lake. Guards greeted them, but they waved them away with one pale hand.

What are you doing there? Harry asked, trying for nonchalance.

Oh, Harry, I have known precisely where you are for some weeks now. Severus wrote to me about
your clever but futile defense of your fellow students. I have found the reports most amusing, but I have finished my affairs on the continent now, and see no reason not to bring the situation under control. Run and hide, little mouse.

Harry woke up in the Room of Requirement, potion a messy mass of white bubbles, and thought very clearly, *I need a way out of Hogwarts, right now.*
Harry pounded down the stairs, yelling. Quite quickly, it assembled the full set downstairs at the round outside table they’d developed for meetings. Hermione had been reading and was cross, Ron had been flying a broomstick around the enlarged room, Draco had been sleeping. No one else was there, because it was well past curfew.

Which reminded him to pull out the Map and lay it flat on the table, awakening it and studying it carefully.

Tom Marvolo Riddle was in the great hall with a group of his supporters was the first thing Harry saw, but Ron was the one who said, “They’ve got teams blocking the ends of all the corridors that lead here. Harry, what’s going on?”

“He finished his business on the continent, that’s what’s going on,” Harry said, matching name after name of Ministry officials known to be compromised by the Order to the parchment in front of him, as well as known Death Eaters like Bellatrix LeStrange.

“Professor Snape tried to warn you,” Draco said quietly, having come around to peer with the rest at the Map.

“Later,” said Harry. “What do we do now? Try to sneak past, get to the tower?”

“They’ve got people outside the doors of all the dorms and the teacher’s rooms,” Ron commented, looking elsewhere on the Map. “Keeping people from wandering into the way, I suppose.”

That could be worse, Harry supposed.

“Harry, what did your vision say?” Hermione asked. “This time.”

“He was interrogating the wandmaker,” and killed him, “And then he came back to Hogwarts to threaten me and tell me to run.”

“Then we don’t do that,” said Hermione. “This room has protections we won’t have the moment we step out the door. We can’t face him yet.”

“He’s got a whole castle full of hostages,” Harry said tightly.

“Which is why we mustn’t!” cried Hermione.

“He’s still immortal,” Ron agreed, “Nothing we can do about it yet, right? We’ve got to keep on going.”

“Still immortal?” Draco echoed.

Harry was looking around the room, searching for inspiration, for… something.

For the entrance to a tunnel.

“I think we have a way out,” he told the group, and pointed.

#
asking *questions*.

“What are you doing about the Dark Lord’s immortality? How do you even know about it? You can’t really be serious.”

“I’m really serious,” Harry responded. Hermione and Ron were talking up ahead.

“Then what’s the plan?”

“It’s a secret.”

“I already know enough to go to the Dark Lord and bring the full force of his wrath down on you,” Draco pointed out. “Right now he’s trying to secure the whole country, you don’t think he’d change priorities if he knew what you were doing?”

“I do think he’d change priorities, which is why we’re running.”

Harry wanted to be checking the Map, not arguing with Draco.

“Harry, tell me what’s going on. I haven’t proven I’m on your side yet? Is that it?”

“No. That’s not it.”

“Then what? Why have you been so – off – since last year?”

“I was there, on the tower.”

“That. That’s why?”

Harry said nothing.

“You idiot. You *moron*. You think I wanted to do any of that?”

The tunnel turned a corner, and perforce Harry did too.

“I think you tried pretty hard for someone who didn’t want to,” Harry said softly.

“Is this really the time?” Draco asked tightly.

“No. But it’s not the time to discuss immortality, either.”

He didn’t really want to talk about horcruxes with someone with a draw to the dark arts and a penchant for attempted murder, anyway. (He was being unfair. He was busy being terrified.)

They walked on in silence, broken by Ron including them in the conversation about where they should go next for an apparition destination.

“Malfoy Manor,” Draco said. “Or did you all forget I have family to warn?”

Er.

“Well,” Harry tried, “At least Bellatrix and, er, Tom are here, not there.”

“We’re calling him Tom now?” Ron asked.

“I can’t remember the sillier nicknames,” Harry explained, right as they were coming up on the exit.
It was at this point they met the Hog’s Head barman and had an interesting conversation about Ariana. Draco jittered in the background, watching the Map.

“They won’t be distracted forever,” Draco said, after things with the barman had become very awkward and involved a short treatise on why Dumbledore’s plans were terrible.

“Right,” said Harry. “Can you side-along this many?”

“I’ll come back,” Draco said dryly, offering his hand to Hermione first. She took it, and they disappeared with a whisper of sound.

#

Malfoy Manor, it turned out, was huge, intimidating, and far too tidy. It made Harry feel like he’d stumbled into a painting.

“Would it kill your family to have a house with a little personality?” Harry asked, not glancing at Ron, who was red-faced and obviously not pleased with Draco’s fancy house.

“This is my father’s personality,” Draco retorted. “See? Peacocks.”

He pointed at a white peacock. Harry and his friends stared at the peacock.

“Yeah, okay,” Harry said, and followed Draco inside and up the stairs.

Harry wasn’t expecting Draco to disarm his mother the moment he entered the same room with her and his father (some sort of sitting room? Library? There were chairs and books, Harry had other things to worry about). Draco, on the other hand, seemed to have a very clear plan for the engagement, catching his mother’s wand in his free hand and gesturing with his wand.

“Sit down, mother.”

His mother sat, folding her hands in her lap and looking at Draco’s companions coldly.

“What’s the meaning of this, Draco?” asked Mr. Malfoy, standing. Harry and Ron trained their wands on him, but Mr. Malfoy didn’t draw his.

“I’ve betrayed the Dark Lord,” Draco said. “So I’d like it if you would both consent to come with me, now, someplace a little less conspicuous.”

Draco’s mother went very pale. Lucius Malfoy appeared to be thinking quickly. (He looked terrible, aged and worn around the edges.)

“I suppose you will want to rescue the prisoners in the basement, as well,” Mr. Malfoy said dryly, beginning to fold his arms.

Draco pointed his wand at his father.

“Father, so help me, if you do not sit down and stop trying to be clever I will turn you to stone, and I’m not entirely certain I can reverse it yet.”

Slowly, holding his son’s gaze, Lucius Malfoy said, “I don’t believe that to be true, Draco.”

Draco slashed his wand at a lamp with a viciously muttered spell, which turned to grey granite.

“You gave me the idea, father, indirectly,” Draco said. “If you try to summon him, we will all die, I
promise. Sit. Down.”

His father sat down again, and made a small ‘proceed’ gesture with one hand. He was smiling, ever so slightly, at his son’s fury.

Draco’s mother burst into tears, and Draco huffed an exasperated breath.

“Mother, I’m trying to be intimidating in front of my allies,” he whined.

Harry snorted a laugh. He couldn’t help it.
The rising tension seemed to unwind with Draco’s resumption of his normal personality.

“Well, I think the stone thing’s creepy,” Ron said. “But can we go before You-Know-Who realizes we’re not where he’s trying to kill us?”

Ron: cutting through conversational Gordian knots since age 5, probably.

“Mother,” Draco said more gently, “I believe you probably have time to pack a bag, and we will be going someplace civilized?”

He glanced at Harry. Why did everyone look at Harry.

Harry, who had picked up something of manners from too much exposure to Kreacher despite his own best efforts, decided abruptly that this was probably the only time in his entire life he actually wanted to talk like a pureblood.

“Cousin Narcissa,” he said, “It would be my honor to extend to you the protections of the House of Black in this time of troubles. Be welcome into our home as our family, on my authority as heir to the head of the House of Black.”

Draco was looking at him as if he’d grown a second head. Harry loftily ignored him. Harry had dignity.

“Mate, you need to spend less time talking to the portraits, you’re beginning to talk like one,” Ron whispered in a carrying voice. Helpful, Ron. Helpful.

Lucius and Narcissa met each other’s eyes in a moment of silent marital conversation. Harry wanted someone to have silent conversations with. (Besides Lord Voldemort.)

“I should be delighted to visit with family,” Narcissa Malfoy said after a few moments. “The London house, the address of which escapes me?”

“That’s right,” said Harry, and decided not to mention that there might be members of the Order there.

Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy had their house elves pack a few bags and arrange things for their absence. Harry looked at his friends.

“Right. Dungeons?”

“Not dungeons,” Draco said. “We don’t have time.”

“Dungeons,” Ron agreed sturdily.

“Which way, Draco?”


“Because it’s the right thing to do,” said Ron.

“The right thing to do is to win the war,” Draco continued.
“Which we do by acting like us, not like the other side,” Harry said. “We’re going, Draco. Come or don’t come.”

Which is how they all ended up storming the Malfoy cellar, surprising two bored guards. It turned out to hold Mr. Ollivander, as well as three other undesirables who Harry didn’t think he had ever met before, though Ron kept giving the blonde girl odd looks. It was all going quite well, right up until the next guard shift showed up, and real battle ensued.

#

The Death Eater raised his wand towards Draco, who had his back turned as he countered a spell from the left. Harry wasn’t going to be in time, he realized with a horrible feeling of shock.

A flash of silver streaked by and knocked the Death Eater off his feet. Harry jumped back, surprised the spell hadn’t hit him – what kind of spell was silver, anyway?

He looked around – no more Death Eaters standing or conscious, unless you counted Mr. Malfoy or Draco. Harry paused to look at the effects of that silver spell.

A silver-handled knife was sticking out of the man’s throat, blood oozing from the wound and pooling on the white marble floor. Harry swiveled to stare at Lucius Malfoy, who was surveying the wide-eyed children with a cool, superior expression.

“I never liked him,” Mr. Malfoy said calmly.

Harry made a mental note to be wary of being literally stabbed in the back, and shook his head to clear it.

“Let us proceed,” Mr. Malfoy added, and turned and led the way back upstairs.

“Harry,” Hermione hissed in his ear as they went upstairs, “We can’t take all these people in through the charm. It’s too risky.”

“I'll take them,” Ron said suddenly, from the other side, “I know some of the right safehouses to try. You two need to keep an eye on that lot-“ he jerked his chin at Mr. Malfoy.

“Ron-“ said Hermione.

“That sorts it, doesn’t it?” he asked defiantly. “I'm not doing any good researching, and I can do this.”

Harry and Hermione shared a despairing look, because Ron was helpful, he was, and they didn’t have time to argue or want to argue in front of terrified prisoners or Mr. Malfoy.

They tried anyway, in a series of furious hisses, but the problem was that Ron was right – he had the most connections in the Order, he knew where various houses were, and if he got caught running around he was a pureblood like Neville or Luna, he probably wouldn’t be murdered out of hand.

It still hurt to watch him apparate away with the first of the prisoners, the blond girl.

“Mr. Potter,” said Ollivander, “I believe I should like to accompany your group. I have information that may be of use.”

“Sure,” Harry said, distracted, looking at the place Ron had been.

“Did you at least agree on a meeting place?” Draco asked.
“Two,” said Harry. “One now, one at Christmas.”

The last of the prisoners were gone, and so was Ron. Harry shook himself again, recalled portraits yelling at him, and offered his arm to Mrs. Malfoy.

“My house can be found at Number 12, Grimmauld Place,” he told the group, and apparated.

The house hadn’t changed much in Harry’s months away. He was greeted at the door by Kreacher, whose ears perked up in delight at the sight of Narcissa.

“Miss Cissy has come home!” was the essence of the carol of delight.

Harry cleared the entryhall, disarming the trap spell as he went, and told Kreacher, “The Malfoys will be staying with us for a while. Please take care of them, but you’re still not allowed to tell them anything important about the war.”

Kreacher was too busy being happy and popping off to prepare bedrooms to take much notice of this order.

“I hope you will forgive me,” said Narcissa Malfoy, “But I must wonder how long you and Draco have been planning this.”

“This? A day. We’d thought Draco would be, er, safer at Hogwarts. Professor Snape told him to get out of the school, and the next day Vol-er-Tom showed up there, so I guess Professor Snape knew something was coming and wanted Draco out of the way?”

It must be almost dawn by now, Harry thought with a yawn.

“You seem very amiable about Severus,” she observed.

“He’s not on my side of the war, but if I win the war, there won’t be any sides anymore, will there.”

At least, Harry thought so. Maybe. His logical mind wasn’t working quite right, he was tired.

“You do not seem very active in your quest to win,” she observed, very mildly.

“That’s because you’re not invited into the plan,” Harry said tiredly. “Excuse me.”

He had to go disarm the trap spell again for Draco and Mr. Malfoy, and Hermione and Mr. Ollivander.

It took a little sorting, but eventually everyone was being ushered off to bed to sort things out in the morning. As the Malfoys were led away by a delighted Kreacher, Harry heard Draco saying to his father, “I thought you said muggle weapons were beneath us.”

“I used a hover charm,” his father replied, and the rest of the conversation was lost into the distance.
Harry had never reached out to Voldemort on purpose before, but on the other hand, Voldemort had never been lurking in a castle full of Harry’s friends before. It was three in the morning, by the clock on the wall, and Harry was tucked into his own bedroom after applying a few judicious locking and alarm charms to the Malfoy guest rooms. He lay back in his bed, closed his eyes, and tried to clear his mind.

There was the slow-roiling anger he wanted to find, off to the side there. Voldemort was always coldly angry. If Harry just reached out and touched-

Pain burst through his scar, and pain echoed across his imagined version of his mind, a flurry of images and thoughts surrounded by wings of fire. That – that had not worked.

The next attempt was Voldemort’s, a flare of intent that tried to cut through the fire in Harry’s mind and recoiled in pain, leaving Harry curled up in a ball with his hand over his mouth, trying not to scream.

This communication lark was far more trouble than it was worth. How was Harry supposed to… oh, silly him.

“Accio sleeping potion.”

Harry took a sip of sleeping potion, and slept, and dreamed he was pacing a hallway in Hogwarts, fury roiling in his mind.

Hello, Harry thought with vicious cheer. I decided to skive off and rescue Mr. Ollivander since you were distracted. I hope you didn’t need to talk to him about anything else.

The fury spiked quite wonderfully.

I see, was the cold reply.

You said we should talk more, Harry pointed out.

A Death Eater interrupting Voldemort’s train of thought with a question and Voldemort hit him with a crucio curse.

So I’ve been thinking about me making you a little more sane by talking to you, Harry continued. And there’s a Muggle movie I think we should reference. It’s about a puppet and a cricket having adventures, and about if the puppet tries very hard and is less of an awful person, he can be a real boy. I think in this case I’m the cricket.

Tiny, lucky, and hard to squish, Voldemort thought. I see the correspondence. Were you here in the first place, or was this a diversion?

I don’t see how that matters for our conversation about how I am going to play your conscience as annoyingly as possible, because I believe in petty, petty revenge.

It matters because of this.

Voldemort pulled a letter out of his robes and opened it, giving Harry a chance to read it.

My lord,
There has been some disruption to the beginning of the new term at Hogwarts, which I wished to pass on to you as soon as possible. I do not believe it merits interrupting you directly, but the students have begun mass protests against our new rules, making use of animate potions and invisibility draughts in the form of small candies.

I trust I do not have to point out the obvious. I have instituted the following security measures (Harry skimmed the list of curses and guard rotations) and will implement any more that you may require. I have received aid from the Ministry for this project, though I have not informed them of its nature.

I eagerly await your return.

Your servant,

Severus Snape

Well, Harry thought in less jocular tones, He wasn’t lying.

The question is whether he was wasting my time.

No. Congratulations, you have a minion. You have lots of minions, why does he matter in particular?

It is always most satisfying to know that you have won something by conquest, rather than having it surrendered to you. I do so enjoy power.

Your conscience cricket says that’s a terrible thing to say. Good night.

Harry twisted his mind away from this dream, into a pleasant nightmare about Lucius Malfoy stabbing people with knives. It was better than reading Snape buttering up to Voldemort by selling out Harry’s location by a long shot, despite all the blood.

#

Harry woke up to someone saying, “I’m going to kill you.”

Harry opened his eyes, sat up, and grabbed his wand, pointing it at-

Sirius. Oh.

He almost lowered his wand and then said, “What did you get me for Christmas two years ago?”

“A book on defensive spells, with Lupin, and a bathrobe. Which walls did we destroy?”

“The front hall and the library.”

“I am going to kill you,” Sirius said amiably, “Because there is no point to owning two linked communication mirrors if your godson never gets his out of his pocket.”

“Oh.”

Er.

“And then Kreacher shows up to tell me he’s brought Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy home for breakfast and will I be attending.”

Harry thought about this one.
“…I’d kill me too,” he admitted.

#

The morning and everyone’s spirits at Number Twelve were much improved by a large breakfast, copious quantities of tea, and the fact that no duels had broken out in the early hours of the night. Mr. Ollivander was, apparently, sleeping in.

“Kreacher,” Harry said as he sat down at the breakfast table, having actually combed his hair for the occasion, “Can I have a headache potion with my tea, or will that violate some etiquette rule?”

“Master Harry should not ask about etiquette rules at the table,” Kreacher said, but a dram of Harry’s usual blue headache potion appeared at his left hand anyway. It did not go with tea.

“Alright, Harry?” Sirius asked, near vibrating with the need to Do Something.

“Just the usual.”

Sirius’ glower was very expressive. Harry ran a hand through his hair, realized he’d just mucked up his plan to have tidy hair, and also that he couldn’t be secretive about absolutely everything.

“We were hiding out at Hogwarts since the beginning of September,” he explained, drawing all of the Malfoy’s attention from their own quiet conversation. “It wasn’t much of a secret, but Vol—”

He glanced around for Ron to scold him. Right, Ron was gone. Darn. Something stronger than darn.

“Anyway, he was busy hunting down a wandmaker on the continent and he just finished murdering him yesterday, so he came back last night to….”

“Kill us,” Hermione prompted.

“Right,” Harry said, gesturing with a forkful of eggs. “He warned me because he’s a sadist, and we were already planning to clear out with Draco, so here we are. Draco’s parents are here because we figured they’d be tortured and murdered otherwise for their son’s, er. Traitorousness? Is that a word?”

“No, Harry,” said Hermione, and added to Sirius, “We didn’t really plan to get stuck at Hogwarts, but things… the plan… it’s complicated.”

Sirius took another cup of tea and said, “Let’s not discuss the plan in front of the Death Eater relatives. No offense, Cissy.”

“I never thought I would see the day you did not wish to cause offense, dear Sirius,” said Narcissa.

Harry eyed them.

“Sirius,” he said after a few seconds, “Have you tried to kill them too?”

“Can’t be sure,” his godfather said cheerfully. “What with the hoods and everything, I could have tried to murder my own brother and I wouldn’t know it was him. I remember this one time Reg came to a party limping from a hex to the arse that I could swear I cast….”

He grinned at Mr. Malfoy’s pinched expression.

“I know taunting your family’s your favorite hobby,” Harry said, “But I don’t really have time today. We have to get through all sorts of explanations and… and… hm. Actually. Do any of you have
access to Bellatrix LeStrange’s vault at Gringotts?”

“I do, yes,” said Narcissa Malfoy, calm as you please, but her eyes were ice cold.

“Then the first thing we’re doing is stealing – er – reclaiming something she has in there. We’ll need Mrs. Malfoy, um, Hermione….”

“Me,” Draco said flatly. “If you’re doing something this absurd.”

“You are not prancing around Diagon Alley today, Harry,” said Sirius. “Not a chance in hell.”

“But-“

“You’re not leaving Lucius Malfoy alone in my house.”

Harry tried to wrap his mind around sending others off to steal a horcrux without him. It didn’t quite compute. Hermione patted his hand.

“Good leaders delegate.”

Harry shot her a look that roughly translated to ‘you are the leader here, what the hell are we doing, why do we not have Ron here to tell us we are being reckless and crazy.’

“I quite like the goblins of Gringotts,” Hermione said. “I’ll prepare polyjuice for us to use.”

“Perhaps you could clarify,” Mr. Malfoy said, “What the item you are sending my wife after is, and why it is in our interest to help you with a plan that we have not been informed of.”

“I know the plan,” Draco said suddenly. “They told me, before I agreed.”

“Be that as it may,” Mr. Malfoy said.

“The sword of Gryffindor,” Harry said, keeping his voice even. “We want it back.”

Lucius Malfoy gave Harry a look that Harry interpreted as ‘you are lying, I know you’re lying, and you know I know you’re lying.’

“Help Harry,” Sirius said in a low, threatening voice. “Or get out there and see who else will help you, right now. I doubt you’ll do so well, without wands. I think there’s a few Death Eaters watching the front door I could throw you to.”

“As long as we understand each other,” Mr. Malfoy said mildly. “Narcissa?”

“If we’re going to go, we should go quickly,” she agreed. “And I shall need my wand for identification.”

Harry really didn’t want to be separated from Hermione as well, but he couldn’t really argue that his presence would make Gringott’s safer. If he trusted Draco to side with Hermione.

Hermione, who apparently trusted Draco, was bustling around getting ready.

Harry had another cup of tea.
Waiting is Hard

Harry would have preferred to spend his morning brooding over Hermione’s safety and Draco’s trustworthiness, but there was just so much to do. Lucius Malfoy had to be settled in the library (locked in the library, honestly, but there were tons of dark books in there to keep him entertained). Mr. Ollivander had to be lured out of his room with promises of breakfast without Death Eaters, and a bit of light conversation had to be had with him and Sirius. Sirius was a better interrogator than Harry.

Kreacher had to be reassured that everything was wonderful and in order, and that if he could just make sure the potions cupboards and kitchen cupboards stayed filled so that Harry could work, he could spend as much time as he wanted waiting on the Malfoy’s hand and foot.

Mr. Ollivander had a requested list of supplies for wandmaking that Harry took down – wand wood, his supplies from his shop on Diagon Alley, feathers and hair and so on.

Sirius was in the kitchen at the long table, feet up on the table, paperback novel in hand.

“What’s that?” Harry asked.

“New book that came out in America last year. It’s called Game of Thrones. Aside from the Slytherins having lions for their symbol, it’s quite good. Dragons, ice-based inferi, and everyone’s life is worse than mine.”

Harry sat down next to him and peered at the book cover, which had a golden dragon on it.

“It’s a muggle book?”

“Mhmm. My girlfriend recommended it to me. She knows I like fantasy.”

“Is this the same girlfriend…?”

“Nah, I don’t think so. Vivian didn’t like my work hours. Shelly’s better, she’s studying to be a doctor so she doesn’t have time for me, either.”

“Huh.”

Harry was not prejudiced against muggles, he was almost sure, but the amount Sirius liked being out in the muggle world was still a little… well… a little weird.

“What do you tell her you do? Or did, before…?”

“I went to school, joined the army, got a bad case of PTSD from the war, was in a madhouse for more than a decade, and then I decided to go into private security.”

Harry blinked at this.

“That’s… honest.”

Kinda.

“I try,” Sirius said, sounding like Remus for a second there. “So… you don’t call, you don’t write.”

Harry swiped a hand through his hair.
“Sorry. I just – I got it into my head that anyone I contacted would be in danger.”

“Harry, I don’t use my own face outside my house because I have a capture and interrogate on sight order from the entire Wizarding World. I haven’t seen my best friend in months, even though I’m his kid’s godfather, because I can’t risk drawing attention to their safehouse. I keep talking the muggle prime minister into not fleeing the country with his family, even though that might be safer for his kids. You can’t put me in more danger.”

“I have a godbrother?”

“That’s what you take away from that? Yeah, you will soon. Teddy Lupin, due in April. I bet he’ll be a cute little bastard.”

Huh. Harry’d never really thought about having a brother before, of whatever distant relation. He bet he’d like it better than cousins – his close cousin Dudley and his more distant cousin Draco were neither of them that easy to deal with.

“So, it’s a good book?” Harry asked, changing the subject.

“Any book that likes wolves as much as this book likes wolves is okay by me,” Sirius informed him.

“Oh! That reminds me,” Harry said. “Accio wolfsbane.”

He pulled a huge, heavy bottle out of his pocket.

“One dose, just enough for one full moon,” Harry told him. “Not poisonous or anything.”

“Harry,” Sirius said dryly, “Are you feeling a little forgetful lately?”

“I’m thinking about some slightly more important stuff,” Harry said, trying not to get defensive and failing miserably.

“You won’t do anyone any good if you drive yourself crazy.”

“I’m not crazy.”

“Hey, kid,” Sirius said, tone gentling. “I know that. I know crazy, right?”

“I just… there’s just a lot going on.”

“Will this bank heist help?”

“Could be. If we’re lucky.”

“Want to try reading my book?”

“Um, sure.”

Sirius tapped the book with his wand, duplicating it, and handed the duplicate to Harry. Harry took it and opened it, but didn’t start reading.

“Still got your tail in a knot?”

“I’m worrying about Hogwarts.”

“Well, check, then.”
Oh, right. Harry pulled out the Map. Names, names… it took him some time, but he identified his various friends, alive and in classes, and the sheer quantity of Death Eater names were no longer there. Good. That was good.

He flipped to the first chapter of the book and fell into a world of magic and wolves and honor.

Forty-five minutes later, Harry had discovered a solemn love of Jon Snow and a prickly hatred of Lady Stark.

“How are stocks of polyjuice doing?” he asked Sirius.

“Alright. You’re not the only person who can brew a potion, Harry.”

“I was actually hoping to get some – we’ve been going through it like pumpkin juice and we’ve been moving too often to keep it boiling for a month.”

“Ah. Yes, I should be able to help with that. What else could you use? The Order stands ready.”

Huh. Er. Harry had to cudgel his brain into working – he kept getting flashes of Voldemort murdering people, dark possibilities of what Voldemort entering Hogwarts could have meant. Harry wasn’t that inured to murder, yet. Ron out there, Hermione out there – Harry was trying so hard not to think about what could be going wrong for them.

“Tell me how the Order is and how they’re doing,” Harry settled on. “I’m looking for… information. Anything could help.”

Sirius nodded, put his book down, and launched into a quiet, concise report. Harry had the eerie feeling this was how Sirius had used to talk to Dumbledore, once upon a time.

Harry missed Dumbledore with a burning fury. His occlumency, based on love, had moved Dumbledore over to the part of love where his memories of his parents lived, the sort of love that hurt to think about.

Instead of thinking about that too deeply, Harry asked all the questions he could think of, that he thought Hermione might ask, and that he thought Ron might ask, and took mental notes. The conversation veered over into discussing the Ministry and who there was dead, missing, or imperius’d, which was sufficiently upsetting to distract Harry from his vivid imagination about what could be going wrong.
Hermione put the small golden cup down on the stone lab counter with the smallest metallic click. Harry put the basilisk fang down next to it.

“Last time I did this,” Sirius said, from where he was casting spells on the walls, “I almost brought the house down. Destructive was an understatement.”

“When are you going to explain what we’re doing?” asked Draco.

“I said I’d show you what we were doing if you were helpful,” said Hermione.

“It’s pretty self-explanatory once you see it,” Harry said. “Who gets to do the honors?”

“Let me,” said Hermione. “I haven’t had a chance to yet, and I’d rather leave the snake to Harry.”

“Snake?” asked Sirius.


When Hermione stabbed the fang into the cup, the room went mad. *Protego* helped a little, but Sirius was the one of them who knew spells that kept the torrent of dark magic away from the three teenagers.

When it was over, they had survived a waterspout and were all soaked to the bone and shell-shocked.

“What in the name of Merlin was *that*,” said Draco, wet blond hair plastered to his head, eyes wild.

“That was one part of Voldemort,” said Harry. “We’re killing him a bit at a time. Welcome to the secret.”

“I don’t suppose you know how many parts are out there,” Sirius said tiredly. “Because it could get pretty tiresome, doing this over and over again.”

Harry and Hermione shared a wordless glance.

“We have some idea,” Harry said. “It’s not going too badly, but we want to be sure he doesn’t catch on too soon. Hermione, did you-?”

“I asked Draco to transfigure replacements for the vault,” Hermione confirmed. “That’s how he argued himself into joining us here.”

Harry glared tiredly at Draco, who folded his arms and looked cool and composed. The jerk.

“I still think Hogwarts should be the most logical place for him to hide things,” Harry added. “But I searched that castle from top to bottom for a month and *nothing.*”

“Did you check the room of hidden things?” asked Draco.

“The… what?”

“The Room of Requirement has a version that’s full of lost things,” Draco said. “I spent most of last year there.”
“Did you ever see a tiara?” Hermione asked urgently. “A silver and blue one?”

“I… I don’t know,” Draco said. “You know, if you’d told me you were looking for something a week ago—”

“Shut up, Draco,” Harry said. “We’ll deal with it.”

“How, exactly? They’ll be guarding the castle more tightly than ever, now.”

Harry didn’t know, and didn’t like the idea of getting trapped there again.

“One’s enough for today,” Hermione said firmly. “Everyone downstairs for chocolate.”

They all went downstairs for chocolate, to be joined by Draco’s parents. Sirius distracted them from questions by talking loudly about his muggle girlfriend, and Harry loved Sirius a lot.

“So, Gringott’s went smoothly?” Harry asked.

Hermione and Draco glanced at each other.

“More or less,” Draco said.

Harry gave the room a general glare.

“That didn’t sound very convincing.”

“We got back alright, Harry,” said Hermione. “Isn’t that what counts?”

“There may be a few people who are under the impression that you were at the bank today,” Mrs. Malfoy told him. “Given the possibilities of polyjuice, it seemed a shame not to sow confusion.”

They were confusing Harry.

#

Dinner was… interesting. Kreacher appeared to have slaughtered a number of lambs for the purpose of bringing his very best culinary achievement to the table. There seemed to be some sort of extremely polite cold war going on between Draco and his parents. Sirius was reading at the table. Mr. Ollivander ate in the library.

Hermione was quizzing Draco about classes, which did not seem to be relaxing either of them.

“So,” Harry tried, “Talk to any of the goblins, Hermione?”

“I did, yes,” she said, with a small smile.

“I suppose next you’ll want to arm the vermin,” said Mr. Malfoy.

“Actually,” said Harry, “We could, couldn’t we? Mr. Ollivander wants to make wands, and goblins and house elves can use wands….”

“Oh, Harry!” Hermione said, perking up. “Do you think so?”

“Harry,” Sirius said, “I hate to agree with Lucius on anything – I really do hate it, stop making me agree with him – but we’d lose a lot of moderate wizard support if we did anything like that. They’d think we were trying to bring back the goblin wars. It would be very easy to paint us as terrorists.”
“I don’t see why we shouldn’t,” Harry said firmly.

“If you’ve learned anything from this,” Sirius said bitterly to his relatives, “It’s to not give Harry bright ideas.”

“Sirius!” Harry complained.

“If moderate wizards would object to something that simple, maybe moderate wizards are wrong,” Hermione said, and got up and left the table.

Harry decided he desperately needed dessert to deal with his life.

#

“Mr. Potter,” said Lucius Malfoy. Harry looked up from his book – Ned Stark really needed to consider listening at doors more often – and Mr. Malfoy sat back down at the table. The firelight made the lines of his face darker and harder than they might otherwise seem.

“Yes?”

Harry didn’t pull his wand. It seemed rude, and Mr. Malfoy didn’t have one.

“I should like to know your intentions towards my family.”

“Right. Well.” What did Harry intend for Mr. Malfoy and family? What did he want for Draco? What had Dumbledore offered, once upon a time? “I’d like you all to go into hiding until the war is over, if that’s alright with you. Stay out of things entirely. Under the circumstances, well, I don’t trust you with a wand at my back. So I’d rather take you off the board, if we’re talking about chess.”

Being Ron’s friend meant a lot of talking about chess.

“Draco thinks that you will involve him in your quest, at your right hand.”

Harry considered this statement.

“Do you want me to involve him in my quest at my right hand?”

“I have mixed feelings.”

“You mean you aren’t sure whether or not it’s a ticket for a messy death.”

Mr. Malfoy smiled thinly.

“Such a way with words you have, Mr. Potter.”

“I’ll talk to Draco. Actually, I had a question for you. What was Riddle like, before he died? Was he less, er….”

If this had been Draco, that blank look in his eyes would be veiled rage.

“The Dark Lord was less angry,” Mr. Malfoy said in a distant, cold voice. “He was more certain of his followers and his place in history. Many people betrayed him that he felt would hold true. He has ever taken things… personally.”

Well, that sort of confirmed the idea that Voldemort was erratic and murderous in part because of splitting his soul so much, though it didn’t explain why chatting with Harry would help.
“He was magnificent,” Mr. Malfoy continued, unaware of Harry’s thoughts. “Perfect in his beliefs and with incredible clarity of purpose.”

“I like a little ambiguity in my allies, myself,” Harry said, thinking about souls, “People with real clarity of purpose seem to crush people without meaning to, seems to me.”

“War requires sacrifice.”

“He doesn’t kill people because it’s a sacrifice, though,” Harry pointed out. “He kills people because it usually solves the problem sooner or later, after you kill enough people. You’d think he’d never heard of population problems.”

Which was channeling pure Hermione, of course. Harry was confused to find Mr. Malfoy smiling thinly.

“And what would be your solution, Mr. Potter?”

“Kill him,” Harry said promptly. “Lock a lot of people up for a while, preferably without Dementors. Have someone take over the Ministry until Draco and Hermione are old enough to run against each other for Minister plausibly. Support whoever wins.”

“For Minister, was it?”

“Draco doesn’t have a very good impression of following people,” Harry informed him. “I don’t think he’ll like it long term.”

“Hm. Good night, Mr. Potter.”

Talking to Slytherins always seemed to have a ton of undercurrents Harry didn’t quite catch. Hopefully he hadn’t let a shark slip through somehow during this one.
Harry and Hermione included Draco and Sirius in their morning discussions about where to look next – where to find Nagini and how to contact someone inside Hogwarts to search the Room of Requirement for a horcrux. It didn’t mean they came up with any very bright ideas over their morning strategy meeting, but it seemed to cheer them up somehow to be included in the planning.

Sirius took Harry aside at lunchtime, after running a few errands and moving Mr. Ollivander. Harry accepted the present of polyjuice and tried out his second-best smile.

“You have to leave again, don’t you?”

“Prime Minister won’t guard himself,” Sirius said ruefully. “I didn’t exactly give notice I’d disappeared, they’re probably worried.”

“Right.”

Harry would be fine. Harry was always fine.

“Look, Harry – promise me you won’t stay here with the Malfoys.”

“Sorry?”

“I’ve been doing my best to distract Lucius, poke him a bit to see how far I need to go before he snaps, but I don’t trust him not to start thinking about angles once there’s not another adult wizard in the house. He’ll be thinking, all he’d need to do was punt you in your sleep out the front door into the waiting arms of our Death Eater buddies and poof, instant favorite again. He’s a snake, and not in the warm fuzzy way the ones you talk to go along with.”

“And Mrs. Malfoy?”

“She’ll follow her husband’s lead. They’ll both be thinking they can get out of this with all their tokens and their cake too, if they just play it right. You’re just too tempting, Harry. Leave them here to entertain Kreacher – heaven knows he could use something to do – and go to one of the other safehouses. Try one with a Weasley, they might have news of your Ron.”

Huh. Harry tried to keep his thoughts off his face.

“Yeah,” Sirius said with a smirk, “I thought that was why you weren’t rushing off to get into your next fight.”

“If we don’t stay here,” Harry said reluctantly, “Our next agreed meetup point isn’t until Christmas.”

“You can’t move the Malfoys,” Sirius said, lowering his voice. “We’ve already compromised one Fidelius charm with them, we can’t lose any more.”

Harry sighed.

“Hermione and I will leave today,” he promised.

“Good,” Sirius said, clapping him on the shoulder. “Keep in touch, or I’ll schedule you for etiquette lessons with Kreacher until you’re twenty.”

“Hey!”
“The best threat is an effective threat,” Sirius caroled, and the rest of the time before he was out the door to fight the good fight was taken up by bickering.

#

“Anyway,” Harry concluded his awkward lunchtime welcome-to-my-house speech, “I hope you’ll all have a very enjoyable stay and I’ll try to make sure the war doesn’t drag on too long.”

“If you think I went through all that trouble just to hide while you take all the glory, Potter, you have another thing coming,” Draco said with a venomous glare.

“It’s not up to you, is it.”

“And who else would it be up to?”

“Well. Me.”

“You do not get to tell me to stay out of this fight. Not a chance.”

Harry refrained from saying ‘you don’t even like fighting’ in front of Draco’s parents.

“It’s just, er. Hermione and I are used to working together,” Harry tried.

“Are you calling me a liability?”

“Sure. Yeah.”

Anything to convince Draco to stay safely out of the way of all the people trying to kill him.

“As if I couldn’t make you crawl on your knees and beg for mercy,” Draco said with a twisted smile.

“You couldn’t,” Harry said lazily.

“Would you like to bet?”

“I would, yeah. I win, you stop arguing with me at every turn or bargaining for a better deal every time we ask you to do something helpful.”

“If I win, I come with you,” Draco said.

“Fine,” said Harry, adjusting his glasses and wishing Draco wasn’t such a pain in the neck.

“Harry?” asked Hermione.

“Stay out of it, Granger,” Draco half-snarled.

#

The duel went something like this, once they’d cleared out the furniture that was in the way of using the largest room, the kitchen. Draco and Harry drew their wands, bowed to each other, and tried to curse each other’s skin off. The first spells met and rebounded, and Harry dodged left while Draco dodged right. One spell turned a teapot into a potted geranium, while the other explosively disarmed a container of kitchen spoons.

“Say, Draco,” Harry called, “Would you say that you’re experiencing moodswings from overuse of dark magic? Protego!”
“Serpensoria! Who taught you to talk during duels?”

“Excuse me, could you please attack the man who just summoned you?” Harry hissed at the attractive black adder, and leaped upwards as Draco’s follow-up spell flashed red through the space he’d just been standing, letting his wordless hover charm catch him for one steady moment as he enjoyed Draco’s widening eyes.

“Expelliarmus!” he bellowed, and caught Draco’s wand as he fell back to the ground, landing on one knee, one wand in each hand.


“…something I’ve been working on,” Harry said innocently, twirling Draco’s wand.

“You’ve been working on flying.”


“Give me my wand back.”

“That’s not very polite. I did win.”

“Give me my wand back, Potter.”

“Say please.”

Draco ground his teeth. Harry waited.

“Please may I have my wand, Harry?”

“Sure,” Harry said easily, and handed it over. “All yours.”

At which point Draco hit him in the face, and they spent an undignified few minutes wrestling. No further wands changed hands.

#

“If you’re done being – being boys?” asked Hermione, checking something in her little beaded bag.

Harry grinned at her, rubbing at his split lip.

“We’re done.”

“Then we’d all better go, hadn’t we?”

“What do you mean, all,” Harry said, narrowing his eyes at her.

“We can’t leave Draco here,” she said matter-of-factly. “I was going to tell you but you both seemed very enthusiastic, so I thought I’d tell you afterwards. His parents can’t be trusted with secrets Draco knows, so he needs to come with us.”

“…oh,” said Harry, and felt a little stupid. But still triumphant!

“Hah,” said Draco, who seemed to feel this meant he was triumphant.

“I still won,” Harry muttered.
“Only because you’re absurd and being absurd is slightly surprising,” Draco said loftily. “I shall win next time.”

“Hmph.”

And that was how Draco joined their adventure for good and all.

There was also a minor detail about wand ownership, but that probably won’t be important later.
They set up camp in a small grove of trees near a small town, cast their defensive enchantments, and settled in for the afternoon.

“What now?” Draco asked, eyeing their new forest home without favor.

“Er,” said Harry, who had yet to properly put together a plan, “Well, Hermione’s working on the runic symbols in the book Dumbledore left her. We generally work on gathering food and practicing spells, and, ah, planning.”

“If I plan with you any more today, we’ll be having another duel and it will be less friendly,” Draco said. “I’m going to go hunt, if we’ve no food. I’m sure I can catch us something reasonable.”

Harry waved him off to this task, and dug out his charms syllabus to half-heartedly practice the Protean charm for twenty minutes before going back to his book, where Daenerys was really in a tight spot.

A white cat rolled into camp, frantically wrestling a rabbit slightly larger than itself. The rabbit was pounding at the cat with its large hind feet and they went end-over-end in a ball of fur and fury.

Harry choked.

He should… probably help. Somehow. No spell he could cast wouldn’t catch both rabbit and cat, though.

The cat ceased gnawing fiercely on the rabbit’s ear and tore itself away, shifting into a bloodied and snarling Draco, who drew his wand and leveled it at the fleeing rabbit.

“Avada-“

Harry grabbed his wrist, and Draco paused, looking at him blankly.

“Let’s skip the dark curses,” Harry said, and didn’t say any of the other things bubbling up inside him.

“It’s a rabbit, Harry,” Draco said slowly. “It’s not even illegal for use on livestock.”

“Just, don’t.”

“Let go of my wrist, Harry.”

Harry let go of his wrist.

“Fine,” Draco said, and put his wand away. “I’ll get fish. You can figure out what to do with fish that will taste reasonably edible, since you’re not doing anything more useful.”

Ah. Huh. Harry glanced rather guiltily at his book, and smothered the impulse to say it was teaching him about politics and deception and things.

“I’ll see about some sort of stew,” Harry said instead. “Hard to go wrong with stew.”

And Harry did have some ginger and burdock root, even if he’d been meaning to use them in potions, not in food.
The resulting fish stew, flavored with some watercress Harry had nearly frozen retrieving from a stream, was nothing to write home about. It was, however, hot and filling, and no one complained.

“Acceptable,” was Draco’s comment. “But you should go shopping tomorrow so you can do better next time.”

“Not your house elf, Draco,” was Harry’s comment.

“Some people are natural hunters and some people are natural cooks,” Draco said loftily.

“I’m going hunting in the shops tomorrow,” Harry said. “For tea.”

“If you can’t be civil, I shall use you to practice my firestarting,” Hermione said, not looking up from her book.

“Do try to go early so there’s some for breakfast,” Draco ‘suggested.’

“Good idea. Thanks.”

This set the tone for the next weeks, which were lazy in their way as autumn came tumbling along, bring with it bad weather compounded by the presence of dementors in habituated areas. They started keeping one Patronus active when they could spare the time, either Hermione’s otter, Harry’s stag, or Draco’s dove.

Harry, who had never seen Draco’s patronus before, steadfastly fought the urge to call it cute when it cooed or preened Draco’s hair.

Three hours in the mornings were devoted to the seventh year curriculum at Hogwarts, mostly to fill the time, in Defense and Charms and Transfiguration. Harry continued to do the cooking, while Draco took his restless energy out on the local wildlife wherever they roamed.

Harry would treasure the mental image of the lanky teenage fluffball of a cat dragging a fully grown dead quail into camp one foggy evening on the moors for a very long time.

After their fourth attempt at shopping was curtailed by dementors, Harry did bring up his question about them.

“How many dementors can there be left in Azkaban with all of the ones out here?” he asked Hermione, who knew history.

“They do breed,” she said doubtfully. “And there were supposed to be at least a thousand there to guard the prisoners in the first place. Still, unless they breed exponentially, I suppose there wouldn’t be quite so many there as there were before.”

“I’m more worried about the ones out here,” Draco said. “We’re not going to do anyone any good if we starve to death.”

“We’re not starving to death,” said Harry, who did not understand the problem.

“Only slowly,” Draco said dryly. “There’s really no way around it, we are going to lead a daring raid on a muggle supermarket.”

“There is a way around it,” said Harry. “We work with what we have and we don’t complain. Right, Hermione?”
Hermione looked faintly guilty. Harry sagged, seeing this evidence of his not supporting his troops properly.

“Of course, Harry,” she said in tones that convinced no one. “Better safe than sorry.”

Which was how Harry and Draco led a midnight raid on a Tesco’s, patroni lighting their way.

Talking about it as a raid or not, Harry hadn’t actually expected to be swarmed by dementors and then by a motley selection of Voldemort’s thugs just for daring to go to the muggle grocery store, nor to end up back-to-back with Draco as Draco turned people into frogs and Harry stunned them.

Harry leaned against the side of the grocery store and eyed his broken jars of jam and crushed grapes.

“Why frogs?” he asked Draco, who was collecting their non-crushed two bags of groceries.

“Tradition,” Draco said shortly. “And I like the way frogs taste.”

Harry blinked up at the starry night sky, and wondered how this was his life.

“Reckon they’ll have reinforcements coming?” he asked Draco. “I’d like to get another jar of jam.”

“I don’t know exactly how snatchers work,” Draco said, “But probably not.”

Harry and Draco went back for another round of groceries.

It turned out Snatchers did send second rounds of men if the first round of eight didn’t come back within twenty minutes.

*This* time Fenrir Greyback sent himself, and battle was joined and fled from just outside town. Harry shrunk his groceries frantically, stuffed them in a pocket, and ran.

Draco, running next to him, said, “This would be a good time to know how to fly.”

“This would be a good time to know how to turn a person into stone!” Harry threw back.

“Well I’m sorry I can’t work out a new spell instantaneously.”

“So’m I,” hissed Harry, and dragged Draco by the hand through a gap in the hedgerows into the woods. “We’re nowhere near camp, right?” he continued in a whisper.

“Right.”

“Good.”

No need to lead *this* particular idiocy to Hermione’s doorstep.

“Greyback knows my scent,” Draco said in what Harry identified as muffled terror. “We can’t just leave and come back later, they won’t stop.”

“Right,” Harry said, and with muffled spells grabbed two invisibility crackers, casting around frantically for the right sort of tree to make a stand in....

“He can smell us,” Draco hissed.

“And hear you, sweet Draco,” called a loud voice from the darkness, though at least it sounded
relatively far away. “Your master is angry. He'll be so pleased with me for finding you.”

Harry rolled his eyes, the expression lost in the darkness of the forest, grabbed Draco’s hand, held his wand level in his hand and thought firmly Up!

They shot into the air, and Harry grabbed a branch with his free hand and used Draco’s moment of weightlessness to heave him up onto it. Draco made only one surprised hiss, and then they were both standing on the branch of a grand old hemlock. Harry handed over an invisibility cookie, and they ate them in silent unison. Long, dark minutes sped by.

Greyback and three minions paused at the base of the tree.

“Did any of you hear disapparation?” Greyback demanded.

“No, sir,” squeaked one.

“Spread out. I want to know if they’re still here,” he growled.

Harry squeezed Draco’s shoulder in silent warning, and took aim at the largest of the dark shapes he could faintly see in the center of the clearing.

Couldn’t be worse than trying to catch a snitch in the rain, right?

Spell light flared.
Harry Plays Moral Compass

The thing Harry had noticed in the earlier confrontation with the Snatchers was that most of them moved slowly. They talked to each other, they took time to aim, often they paused to grandstand or say their spells aloud. It was nothing like fighting Draco or the helpless feeling that came from facing Professor Snape across a battlefield, reading every move ahead of time and moving before you finished thinking. Harry didn’t think he and Draco had realized they were focusing on reflexes above spellcasting versatility, but the end result was this – he and Draco were very, very fast with a very limited number of spells. Seeker reflexes.

They hit three of their targets with stunners before their targets realized what was happening, felling two out of the three. The last small shape, not targeted, started yelling, and it turned out you needed more than one stunner to fell Fenrir Greyback.

A sizzling green spell missed them by inches.

“Right,” Harry said. “You shoot, I’ll drive.”

“What? Stop talking in absurd muggle idioms,” Draco said, even as Harry grabbed his hand, held his wand carefully, and leapt for the tree across the clearing.

If it had been daylight, they would be dead, Harry suspected. Or captured, which presumably would be worse. But wolves are not well known for their eyesight or skill with avian prey, and Harry was very used to thinking in three dimensions. It wasn’t that his aim with a leap was very good – but once Harry was in the air under the influence of a hover charm, it was sheer instinct to shift his weight to bring him to the target he wanted.

Draco took this opportunity to scream shrilly and blanket the clearing with spells in a wild red flurry that left Harry blinking spots out of his eyes.

“Draco,” he complained, when no one shot at them for long moments.

“Never do that again.”

“What?”

“We are going to master legimency so that your absurd plans can be conveyed in time for me to know what my role is, you-“

“It wasn’t an absurd plan,” Harry countered, leaning against the trunk of the pine tree and trying to look like it had been a plan at all.

“Let’s imitate squirrels,” Draco hissed. “Squirrels never get eaten by wolves, no, squirrels are very long lived creatures!”

“Yelling might not be the best plan right now.”

“I. Do. Not. Care. I would love someone I could curse right now without hurting anyone’s precious feelings.”

“I meant, be quieter, Draco.”

“You’re very calm,” Draco observed, more quietly.
Harry thought about this.

“They weren’t actually that scary?”

“Fenrir Greyback is very scary. And probably going to wake up soon.”

“Huh. Right. Let’s go down, then.”

“How about we don’t,” Draco hissed.

“You really should trust me more.”

“I trust you fine. I do not trust your ability to fly. Because you can’t fly.”

“I fly fine. I just need a medium for the spell and I’m not sure a wand is the best thing. I’m thinking about strapping tiny broomsticks to my shoes.”

“You have no respect for tradition or magical woodworking and let go of me.”

As Harry had suspected, strapping tiny broomsticks to his shoes as a mental image had sufficiently distracted Draco from Harry grabbing him and tossing them both off the tree branch they’d been perched on. Draco screamed manfully on the way down.

“In martial arts movies,” Harry said helpfully as they landed in a heap, “You’re supposed to scream like that to embrace your inner warrior.”

“Hng. Kill you. Present your body to the dark lord.”

“That would be a nice present,” Harry admitted, and admitted privately to himself that he was not so much calm as putting his entire existence through some sort of filter in order to cope, the way he tried to filter Professor Snape’s particularly snide remarks and Voldemort murdering people in front of him.

There was a sound from the darkness, and suddenly things became rather busy again for a while.

They stood over the stunned bodies of Greyback and his snatchers and felt awkward. Harry adjusted his glasses.

“He’s going to wake up, track us down, and murder us,” Draco said. “And we’re not going to do a thing about it, are we?”

“Er.”

“If my father were here, he’d just kill him.”

“If your father were here, we’d probably have other problems.”

Draco was silent.

“You’re right, okay?” Harry said, and ran a hand through his hair. “He’s probably going to go off and hurt kids and murder people who go to Tesco’s at night and whatever else he does. He’s the one who – well. Professor Lupin.”

“Huh. I liked him. He was fair.”
“You got him sacked because you feared for your life.”

“I’m a complicated creature.”

“You’re an arsehole.”

“Mm,” Draco agreed. “We should still kill him. Even if the rest of them aren’t much, he’s dangerous. You want to fight him again?”

Harry did not want to fight Greyback again. They’d thought they’d gotten him with the second round of stunners only to have another group of snatchers show up and try to enervate their comrades, and Harry was shaky and sweating and exhausted. He wished he was in bed, not trying to talk himself into murdering someone. Or out of murdering someone. He wasn’t honestly sure.

“I’ll do it,” Draco said firmly. “It would probably give you nightmares or something ridiculous.”

Harry thought very quickly as Draco raised his wand.

“Wait,” he said, and he was pleased when Draco actually waited. “You said that spell to turn things to stone was almost ready for humans but you thought it might be fatal?”

“…yes.”

“How easy would it be for someone to reverse?”

“Not very, not unless they got Professor McGonagall to consult. Her spells to reinforce statues are unique.”

Harry thought about Professor McGonagall’s giant chess set, and took a moment to consider how you got from that to the idea to turn someone into a giant… well, chess piece. It took a certain kind of mind, that was for sure.

“…I think that this would be a good opportunity to test it. When the war’s over, you can, ah. Defrost him and he can stand trial.”

“Or I could turn his organs into stone at a different pace than the rest of him and kill him horribly. I’ve had some very unfortunate mice.”

“He’s a werewolf. He’s sturdy.”

And Harry didn’t know what else he could say that would keep Draco from committing murder, since Harry had only a passing idea what he would say. Don’t murder the evil man who was trying to kill us and attacks kids? Because I said so?

“…wish me luck,” Draco murmured. “And give me some light.”

“Lumos,” Harry murmured, and the clearing sprang into abrupt illumination – trampled grass and scattered bodies, shadows sharp-edged and stark beneath the pines.

Draco took a deep breath, and slashed his wand sharply at Greyback’s prone form.

“Lapisifors petrificare,” he barked.

It seemed almost as if nothing had changed, until Harry realized that he was used to night vision, and
Greyback shouldn’t be shades of grey and white under the light of his spell. Granite skin, white stone clothes, hair an odd pink color.

“Well,” Harry said.

“I think it went well,” Draco said.

“What was that last part? The first part was just transfiguration.”

“Petrification. Like the basilisk. It means it qualifies as a dark curse.”

“…oh.”

Draco smiled at him, like a snake.

“Give me a few moments to add the reinforcement spells so no one can break him easily,” Draco added.

Harry, who knew a lost cause when he talked to someone who’d been coming up with spells to imitate a basilisk (as if there weren’t better role models?), decided to check on the groceries he’d hastily stuffed into his pockets.

Well, the eggs were done for, that was for sure. This was going to be a mess to clean up.

“Come on,” Harry said, “Hermione might not be awake yet if we head back now, and we need to move before another batch shows up.”

#

“You two have been fighting, haven’t you,” was the first thing Hermione said when she woke up to them arguing over who should sleep and who should have the watch for the rest of the night.

“What are you talking about,” Harry said, resisting the urge to confess everything immediately.

“I don’t understand why you have to do this,” she said waspishly. “As if we don’t have enough enemies out there, you have to spend your time on silly duels?”

“Oh,” Harry said, grabbing this lifeline, “Ah, sorry Hermione. We got carried away, I guess.”

Hermione was quite unimpressed, but at least she wasn’t terrified about having two teams of snatchers on their trail. It was easy enough to casually suggest them move to another location as dawn approached.

Or was it that he didn’t want to talk to her about what they’d done to Greyback? As he watched Draco eat an apple in apparent complete tranquility, Harry couldn’t help but wish he could talk to Professor Snape about it. Professor Snape had a talent for cutting through to the heart of the issue, whatever it was, in as few words as possible.

Harry just wasn’t sure what Professor Snape would think of solving problems by experimentally turning people to stone.
Harry woke to a dream of a library the next night, behind Voldemort’s eyes.

“Hello, Harry. Did anything unusual happen last night?”

Harry decided the better part of valor was silence. Like a mouse.

“Lord Voldemort is displeased,” hissed the high, cold voice, and Harry’s occlumency barriers, his wings of fire, were suddenly swamped in a storm of hissing liquid – was that visualized snake venom?

For a moment and an age, Harry could feel and hear nothing. He wasn’t even certain he existed, but this attack was an attack on Draco and he loved Draco and he held onto that love, wrapping it around everything that Voldemort wanted to see. Harry loved Draco – which was stupid, actually, when had he decided he even liked the giant git, were they even friends? Love was a pretty strong word for being willing to die for someone.

Or maybe it wasn’t strong enough.

Voldemort’s scream of anger and pain was closer to an animal snarl than anything human, as reality came back into being around them, fire and purple liquid and roiling smoke disappearing from Harry’s conscious mind.

_I don’t get this cross with you when you kill people_, Harry said, just because it was the first thing that came to mind.

“Lord Voldemort,” the man hissed, “Does not tolerate thieves.”

Harry thought of a little box of treasures in an old wardrobe, stolen from fellow orphans.

_Have you considered not counting people as things?_ Harry asked, because it seemed a relevant question.

All this got was a very rude hiss.

_I’m a parselmouth, you know._

_One of many things about you that frustrates me, Harry. Be silent, unless you wish me to lose my temper._

Harry considered the merits of Voldemort losing his temper, and considered whether or not he had the energy to have someone else possibly murdered because of him.

_Can we talk, since I’m here? Not about the war._

Voldemort was silent for long enough Harry thought he’d get kicked out of the dream pretty quickly.

_Go on, Voldemort thought, at length._

_How’d you decide to kill the first person you killed?_

_Do you know who that was?_
Either your father or Myrtle, Harry thought. Dumbledore told me.

Voldemort was silent.

*Something about knowing your enemy, I think,* Harry continued into the chilly silence.

*The man was an easy decision,* Voldemort thought suddenly. *Everything I detested about the world wrapped up in one package. Rather, I expect, like you felt last night. Did it make you feel powerful, Harry?*

Harry did not know why he’d thought asking advice from Voldemort about murdering people had been a good idea. Maybe it was just that Voldemort was the resident expert in murdering people.

*Myrtle, on the other hand, was an accident,* Voldemort continue, almost gently. *She was in the wrong place at the wrong time. She was a complete waste of air, it was not as if anyone would miss her, but still, I did have second thoughts about it. I wondered if I could have done something different.*

Harry winced internally.

*A great many people are going to die in this war, Harry, unless you stop it,* continued that quiet murmur. *You are their symbol, whether you like it or not. Come to me and surrender, and your death will be quick and entirely painless. Perhaps, like Myrtle, you will even leave a ghost. The war will end, and your friends and remaining family will be spared. Wouldn’t that be nice, Harry? You must be tired.*

In Harry’s moment of shock and inattention, Voldemort’s mind struck, grabbing at the memories topmost in Harry’s mind. Draco, standing still and fierce over Greyback’s stone not-corpse. Sirius, furious, demanding Harry keep in touch. Green light, and Dumbledore falling from the tower, with the Dark Mark glowing overhead, and Snape’s furious snarl.

Harry’s occlumency barriers snapped back into place, and he took a moment to recite the list of ingredients of polyjuice. Talking to Voldemort was the worst idea in the world. He should really wake up now. Once he got his breath.

*What a beautiful memory, Harry,* Voldemort crooned. *Thank you very much.*

*I didn’t give it to you on purpose.*

*Nonetheless, I shall treasure it.*

*I’m waking up now.*

*What will you do now, Harry?*

*…keep running,* Harry said, because that was obvious. *I’m not a ghost yet.*

*I believe I shall research how to ensure a ghost is created,* Voldemort thought cheerfully. *I should so hate to lose the pleasure of your company after I kill you.*

*Thanks,* Harry thought sarcastically.

*Don’t be cross, Harry. Would you like a reward for being cooperative?*

*You don’t have anything I want.*
“On the contrary, I believe I have something you want very much.”

They got up from their armchair by the fire and walked purposefully out into the corridor of Malfoy Manor. They went down a hallway, up a flight of stairs, and through an ornate door.

Professor Snape looked up from a book, looking tired, hair mussed.

“My lord?”

Voldemort took another chair in the sitting room and said, as if continuing a conversation, “A potion consisting of moonwater, pennyroyal, unicorn hair, and tears, as the main ingredients. Perhaps with blood to seal the bargain. Thoughts?”

“I do not see what the point of such a potion would be, my lord,” Professor Snape said, attention seeming to focus for the first time.

“An antidote.”

“Ah.” Professor Snape looked into the distance. “It would require experimentation, and the idea is probably useless.”

“Considering the potential creator, this does not surprise us,” Voldemort murmured, and prompted Harry internally, *Questions?*

It was a very disconcerting half an hour, letting Voldemort and Professor Snape tear his ideas apart, but a spark seemed to light in Professor Snape’s eyes by the middle of it, and that kept Harry attentive.

Attentive and quietly furious and oddly tempted. By the end of the half an hour, Harry had a new series of experiments planned and Voldemort and Professor Snape had been diverted to another topic of conversation.

“Have you seen her today, my lord?”

“You overstep, Severus. My indulgence does not extend too far.”

Snape bowed his head.

“My apologies, my lord.”

Voldemort seemed to pause, considering.

*Good night, Harry,* he thought, and Harry’s dream ended, as if cut off with a knife.

Whoever *she* was, Harry rather thought Voldemort didn’t want Harry witnessing the discussion.
Winter is Coming

The weather grew colder and colder. They did not dare remain in any area too long, so rather than staying in the south of England, where a hard ground frost was the worst of their worries, they continued to meander up and down the country, braving a mountainside, where sleet pounded the tent; a wide, flat marsh, where the tent was flooded with chill water; and a tiny island in the middle of a Scottish loch, where snow half buried the tent in the night.

Ron had not been the most peaceful of companions to run away with, having had a family to worry about and being used to such strangenesses as three full meals a day, but Draco was definitely worse. Hermione engaged him in explaining parts of the Hogwarts seventh year that she hadn’t been able to understand from the textbooks and curriculum, which made him smug. She then proceeded to see Harry practicing his silent hover charm leaps and master it in fifteen minutes of casual study before declaring it a waste of her time, which made Draco both competitive and furious.

It made Harry competitive, too, but he knew how to have a competition. He didn’t spit insults or sulk, he just practiced until he fell down and hit his head and made Draco laugh at him.

So all was really well that ended well, right?

Harry attempted to explain all of this to Sirius one evening, having taken a quiet moment to himself to escape their semi-flooded tent and find himself a rock in the bog to sit on. Harry added ‘bogs are slushy when half-frozen’ to his long mental list of things that other people probably did not know that were unpleasant.

“You guys making any progress?” Sirius asked, sounding tired, which made Harry feel abruptly guilty. He wasn’t the only one in danger or uncomfortable, after all.

“Some,” he hedged. “We’re trying not to rush into anything.”

“Don’t try that,” said Sirius. “Just try to remember to call me so I can come rushing with you.”

Harry abruptly understood exactly why Sirius had been the best friend his father could have had.

“I really miss Ron,” he confessed. “Ron always comes rushing into danger with me – no matter what, he never says I should call a teacher or anything, he just comes with me and fights with me and – I worry about him. Have you heard anything?”

“Not so much,” Sirius admitted. “The Order isn’t exactly keeping up with their letters right now.”

“What about Remus?”

“Well,” Sirius said. “Funny story, that.”

Which is how Harry found out he was a god-brother and also that Remus was quite capable of being dead calm in a fight and entirely terrified of happiness.

“He’s always been like that,” Sirius said thoughtfully as snow dripped off Harry’s nose. “Never complained a whit about pain, but had the hardest time believing he had actual friends. Made me want to bite people.”

“…did you?”
“Nah, James and I just pranked ‘em.”

“Oh.”

A little butterfly in Harry’s chest fluttered its wings, as he thought about his dad pranking people on Remus’ behalf. It was nice, having these little fragile connections with his parents. Loving the same people. Finding the same things important. Fighting the same war.

“Oh."  

“Sirius? I’ve been… having these dreams.”

And, haltingly, Harry explained. About Voldemort, and the threat of murdered children, about the way Voldemort’s mood would shift from murderous to friendly in the span of seconds. About friendly offers to turn him into a ghost, and how Harry really, truly didn’t know what was going on with Professor Snape except that he was in trouble.

“Harry,” Sirius said, after he’d asked questions and ferreted out strategic information and all the things a responsible soldier had to do, “You know what I’m going to say next?”

“I shouldn’t talk to him,” Harry said heavily.

“No. No, Harry. None of this is your fault. Nothing he does is your fault. No matter what you do, no matter what he says, no matter how he worms his way into your head and makes you doubt yourself. He’s the crazy bastard that murdered Lily and James, and you’re a good kid with too much weight on his shoulders. Don’t let him give you any more.”

“…oh.”

Oh.

“And next time he’s whispering at you, tell him Sirius Black says he’s full of shit,” Sirius added in such a matter-of-fact tone of voice that Harry burst out laughing, startling a couple birds into sullen flight.

Harry couldn’t stop laughing for a while. For a long while.

“Okay, I’ve kept you up long enough,” Sirius said after Harry had quieted down. “Talk to you in a few days – password will be Glitter Wars. By the way, was that you that got the Snatchers all in a tizzy? The radio was talking about it.”

“We ran into Greyback,” Harry admitted.

“Good for you, kid. A few less people are being shipped off to Azkaban tonight because of that.”

There was a brief interlude while Sirius explained about rebel radio, Snatchers, and Azkaban’s recent influx of residents.

“I’m glad we ran into him, then,” Harry said sturdily. “Every little bit helps, right?”

“Right,” Sirius agreed. “But stay focused, huh?”

“Oh, I am. I am.”

Voldemort had a focusing effect on the mind.

“Night, Harry.”
“Night, Sirius.”

#

There were light moments, too.

"Harry, it's rosemary. You don't need rosemary for any of the potions you're brewing," said Hermione, snatching it from his hands.

"I could need rosemary."

"This chicken recipe needs rosemary now. How many potions recipes need rosemary?"

"Three!"

Hermione gave him a look.

Harry did not win the argument.

#

“Harry,” purred Draco, “Why is there hair in my soup?”

“Oh. Um.”

“How would you like it if I experimented on you, Potter?” Draco asked, holding up a tiny stone mouse and waggling it at Harry. Harry glared at Draco and the mouse equally.

“I asked you to stop experimenting on the mice.”

“…Draco, can I test potions on you?”

“No.”

“Please?”

"No."

“But, Draco….”

Harry did not win that argument either.
It was nearly Christmas when Hermione discovered Grindewald’s mark, tucked away in her copy of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*. Christmas had been their agreed upon day to meet Ron at Godric’s Hollow, though Harry wanted to go a day early to visit his parents and Bathilda Bagshot. Once they had Ron, they would be on the move again, and probably plotting how to break into Hogwarts once more.

Harry’s potion experimenting progress was hampered mostly by his lack of test subject (once Draco had caught on) and by his limited supply of unicorn hair and different kinds of blood. His own blood seemed to have the best effect, the day he’d badgered Draco into trying his best guess. Draco had been more interested in stealing one of Hermione’s books on alchemy that day than continuing his experiments with stone mice. The next day, however, Draco appeared to steel himself before continuing his own spell research, and Harry hadn’t been too sad to stop feeding Draco potions. The dark effect, whatever you called it, seemed to have a cushioning effect on the mind in regards to horrors like exploding mice.

Harry thought perhaps, sometimes, he could use a cushioning effect on his own mind, but then he thought about Voldemort and desisted in this line of reasoning.

Harry had been surprised that Draco didn’t push to return to check on his parents, but Draco had shrugged in complete unconcern.

“They’ll be happy enough once I’m a war hero.”

And so they came to Christmas, and Godric’s Hollow.

In another lifetime, Harry had never had a home to call truly his own, a family to have awkward holidays with. He wasn’t able to talk to Sirius about his parents as Christmas rolled around, or call up memories of dinners with Dudley and Sirius talking about bands. Sirius never told him the tale of how he and James decided it was time to stop playing pranks and start really joining the war.

In this lifetime, Godric’s Hollow meant Ron, a chance to learn about Dumbledore, a chance to say goodbye and hello (and wasn’t there a song about that?) to his parents.

Harry wondered, as he drank his polyjuice, if it really was addictive.

Hermione and Draco were quiet during his part of the trip to Godric’s Hollow, allowing Harry space to think. Perhaps too much space, he thought dryly as he brooded and looked at gravestones. Ron would have been talking nervously, and it would have been really peaceful knowing someone else was nervous.

He looked at the ruined house his parents had lived in and thought about what Sirius would think of this place. He’d like the sign, but would he ever come here? No, Harry thought, not and see the signs of his worst failure. This was something Harry could never share with him.

It tore his thoughts uncomfortably close to something he’d been managing to avoid thinking about, Snape’s part in his parents’ murder. They’d never had a chance to talk about it, and that was certainly not a moment Harry was going to ask Voldemort to mediate. Harry had found out and then Dumbledore had died and everything had cascaded into this horrible inevitable flood of carefully planned events, Dumbledore not even needing to be alive to carefully orchestrate events in Harry’s life.
In a way, it was reassuring that Dumbledore really had been on the side of good. What was that line from Lord of the Rings, that Harry had read so many years ago? Someone evil would seem fairer and feel fouler? Voldemort certainly could seem very fair, very reasonable, very righteous whenever he wanted to, even as he was suggesting you kill yourself or murder kittens or something. Dumbledore mostly seemed crazy, secretive, and somewhat annoying.

Merlin, Harry missed the old coot.

And then Harry’s musings were interrupted by a muffled old woman who invited them back to her house. He and Hermione engaged her in conversation (if it could be called that) with Draco hanging back as lookout, as agreed. Bathilda Bagshot did not inspire confidence.

Harry went upstairs with her at her request, distracted by the picture of the merry-faced thief.

The stairs were steep and narrow; Harry was half tempted to place his hands on stout Bathilda’s backside to ensure that she did not topple over backward on top of him, which seemed only too likely. Slowly, wheezing a little, she climbed to the upper landing, turned immediately right, and led him into a low-ceilinged bedroom.

It was pitch-black and smelled horrible: Harry had just made out a chamber pot protruding from under the bed before Bathilda closed the door and even that was swallowed by the darkness.

"Lumos," said Harry, and his wand ignited. He gave a start: Bathilda had moved close to him in those few seconds of darkness, and he had not heard her approach.

"You are Potter?" she whispered.

"Yes, I am."

She nodded slowly, solemnly.

"Have you got anything for me?" Harry asked, but she seemed distracted by his lit wand-tip.

"Have you got anything for me?" he repeated.

Then she closed her eyes and several things happened at once: Harry's scar prickled painfully; the dark, fetid room dissolved momentarily. He felt a leap of joy and spoke in a high, cold voice: Hold him!

Excuse me, Harry thought, vision strangely doubled as he felt the connection take hold, even as he stayed put in his body, I can hear you, you know. I'm trying to concentrate on something, can we do this later?

Oh, of course, Harry, Voldemort purred happily. We’ll talk soon.

Harry went back to his conversation, running a hand through his hair in the vain hopes it would allow him to concentrate. Carefully, he concentrated on Dumbledore, on his parents, those memories so close to the surface. Occluding felt harder than usual, as if a heavy presence pressed against his mind.

Harry really shouldn’t have been surprised to find himself wrestling a giant snake, and yet he was.

She’s a horcrux, he reminded himself as he failed to get any air and shout, failed to do anything. A horcrux. Have to- have to-
He was flying, Voldemort was flying, they were flying. It felt glorious, even as Harry was aware that his own body was somewhere back in Godric's Hollow and he had no reason to be so happy, that was just echoes of Voldemort.

*If I die being strangled by a giant snake, I’m going to find that a little anti-climactic,* Harry thought at him.

*Don’t be silly, Harry. She’s just holding you for me. Just as I am holding your mind here, so that you can’t struggle.*

Oh. Goodie.

*What shall we talk about?* Voldemort thought cheerfully, as they flew through the chill winter sky, stars twinkling above them.

*We could talk about how you manage real flight,* Harry suggested, trying to hide his panic. *I’ve only managed a bit of hovering.*

*Oh, it’s a matter of raw power and will, not anything so simple as a charm. You probably have the strength for it, but, I’m sorry my dear, you are unlikely to have much opportunity for practice in the near future.*

*I’m not your dear.*

*I hardly think this is the best time to antagonize me based on my choice of language, Harry.*

*Forgive me for being in a bit of a bad mood.*

*Of course you’re forgiven. You’ve given me a Christmas present, after all.*

Harry was silent, and enjoyed the sensation of flight.

There was a strange sensation, as if hearing Voldemort’s mental voice from far away, and then Harry felt Voldemort’s anger press painfully against his mind.

*Stop that,* Harry thought briskly. *You’ll burn yourself on my shields and fall out of the sky, and while that would be pretty funny, I don’t know what it would do to us for both of us to be unconscious.*

*As if that would happen.*

*Quirrell died by burning,* Harry countered.

*You really should count that as your first murder,* Harry, Voldemort commented venomously. *Precocious, starting at eleven.*

*Well, it’s probably your influence. How had Snape put it. You can’t be good for a developing mind.*

*And yet here you remain, stubborn and cheeky.*

*That’s covered in the prophecy,* Harry offered. *Not that I’m telling you what it is, but it does make the whole thing make more sense.*

*You are being deliberately obnoxious.*

*Of course. I can’t do anything right now but distract you. Did we get away?*
Harry fell silent at the burning cold tone, the murderous intent.

They were striding into the fetid house, up the stairs, through a broken staircase and smashed furniture. They knelt by a giant snake with a slashing wound down her side, and cast spells in impenetrably quick succession, cleaning and binding and covering the wound, their anger cold and all-encompassing, their memories drawn back to another night when everything had gone wrong.

You have the Sword of Gryffindor, Voldemort thought in a very quiet hiss.

“Masster,” Nagini hissed.

“Silence, Nagini.”

The snake fell silent, tongue licking the air fitfully.

Harry felt something dreadfully like sympathy, as Voldemort rested a hand on her dry scales and seemed to be gathering his thoughts. This, Harry thought, was the closest Voldemort came to love, this love-of-self-outside-of-self. He loved Nagini, because Nagini was him.

Harry. What were you doing here.

Harry only had a few seconds to think and he thought these things in quick succession: at all costs he must not let Voldemort know they were hunting Horcruxes. Voldemort was a walking lie detector. He had to tell almost all of the truth.

I thought she could tell me something about Dumbledore, he thought carefully. Dumbledore never talked about himself, and the story about his sister was… I was….

Go on.

They were still kneeling by Nagini’s side, motionless as any snake ready to strike.

I noticed a picture of the handsome man from the wandmaker’s vision downstairs, Harry offered. Who is he?

That got them up, standing abruptly and sweeping down the broken stairs to stare at the recently-dusted photograph.

Gellert Grindewald, Voldemort. It must be.

I don’t understand.

They were allies, until Dumbledore betrayed him. They were… yes. Perhaps this was not a waste of my time after all.

Great, Harry thought to himself dryly. At least Voldemort seemed distracted.

To answer your question, Harry thought grumpily, I was visiting my parents’ graves. I hadn’t before.

Ah. Christmas sentiment. Well, I did think you might.

They climbed the stairs again, and looped Nagini around their neck like a familiar, comfortable scarf.

Can I go back now? Harry asked. My friends will be worried.
I have another errand to run tonight, so yes. How does that phrase go? Merry Christmas, Harry.

Merry Christmas, er, you.

Harry fell into sleep with Voldemort’s cold laughter echoing in his ears.

That night, they dreamed of Harry’s parents’ murder, and Voldemort’s death.

In the darkness of their shared sleeping mind, after the last green spell had rebounded, Harry offered, 

*Let’s never visit Godric’s Hollow again, until the war is over.*

Agreed.

And they said nothing more to each other that night.

Harry woke with the dawn, to Hermione’s concern, Draco white-faced and grim, a broken wand, and Ron.

At least *something* had gone right yesterday.
“So, let me get this straight,” Harry said, over a small metal cup of tea a few minutes later, looking out at the chill dawn light and feeling the chill in his bones. “Hermione went upstairs and threw curses at Nagini, who let me go. One smashed the window, attracting the attention of Draco and Ron, who were both lurking around like lurkers. My wand smashed in the confrontation, and Ron drew the Sword of Gryffindor. Which he used to nearly take Nagini’s head off, but His Snakiness turned up and you all scarpered?”

“Right, mate,” Ron said, looking drawn and guilty and red-haired and wonderful.

“And I missed all of it?” Harry asked.

“You were busy,” Draco said tightly. “Mumbling in snake.”

Harry froze for a second.

“Well, I guess it’s too bad about my wand,” Harry said immediately. “We’ll have to get in touch with Ollivander, huh?”

“You were busy mumbling in snake, Harry,” Draco continued inoxerably, because he wouldn’t feel guilty about setting his mother on fire, the git. “You said it wasn’t an issue anymore.”

“Well,” said Harry, who had said that and might have been exaggerating a little bit.

“Weren’t you the one giving me the lectures on the power of friendship to defeat evil and not hiding things from friends, Potter?” asked Draco.

“…I did do that,” Harry allowed.

“Three times,” Draco hissed. “And I put up with it, because I thought you had some sort of absurd secret to impart. But you’re just – mucking about!”

“Calm down, mate,” said Ron. And since when was Ron that tall?

“I am not your mate,” Draco shouted, and then paused, panting.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” said Hermione. “About your wand.”

“…we can try to repair it, can’t we?” Harry asked, abruptly tired and scared just as he could see the rest of them were. He’d rather been counting on his wand and the twin cores with Voldemort.

They tried to repair it. They failed.

Life had its way on keeping rushing onwards. There was Gellert Grindewald to discuss, after all, and how he might be connected to Voldemort’s project. There was the biography of Dumbledore to read, and marvel, and ignore Draco’s sniff. Draco sulking was reassuringly normal, but Harry couldn’t muster up his normal humor about it. Without a wand, even his pockets seemed useless, just clinking, taunting things full of secrets he couldn’t access.

He wasn’t proud of yelling at Hermione, but in the end it was good to talk to someone about Dumbledore. All the weird mixed up feelings about finding out that all his adult role models had had
their brushes with the Dark and the urge to conquer the world came pouring out, and he was left empty. Was he the weird one, that he’d never looked at one single thing and gone ‘I would like to conquer that’ that wasn’t a potions textbook?

Hermione hugged him.

“You’re not the weird one,” she assured him tearfully. “You’re a unicorn.”

And then Harry was laughing, and crying, and he was glad Ron and Draco were off somewhere and letting Hermione handling talking about feelings. It was okay to break down a little in front of Hermione, somehow. It was okay.

#

They did have a couple days to figure out their next steps and talk. Ron had, it turned out, been hopping around the country rescuing people and playing knight errant, first with one set of refugees and then others – muggleborn keeping one step ahead of the Snatchers, though the Snatchers had lightened up in recent weeks. Harry and Draco shared a glance and did not share their part in that, but after that Draco stopped harping on Harry about his keeping of secrets. He’d gone to Grimmauld Place but heard a voice that sounded like Lucius Malfoy and scarpered, much to Harry’s tired chagrin.

“They’re all being shoved into Azkaban,” Ron said darkly, staring at their little jar of blue fire with a grim look on his face. He looked older, somehow, compared to just a few months ago. “And they don’t live long there, I don’t think.”

“Hermione and I were talking about breaking into Azkaban,” Harry commented. “Not seriously, but – we’ll have to do it sometime, won’t we?”

“Don’t be absurd,” said Draco from the other side of the fire. Draco still hadn’t forgiven Harry, even if he’d stopped being snippy about secrets.

“I’m not,” Harry said shortly. “It’s just something to think about.”

“It’s full up on Dementors and worse things,” Ron said. “Don’t know how Sirius did it.”

“Turned into a dog and ran, I think,” said Harry.

“It’s on an island in the middle of the sea,” Ron objected. “Can’t have just swum the whole way, can he?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said defensively. “I haven’t asked, have I? Not something you just bring up over dinner, is it.”

“Guess not,” Ron said.

“It would be a good thing to do,” Hermione said, something Harry distrusted in her casual tone. “If they’re locking up Muggleborn. The Death Eaters did it a few times, and that was with more Dementors. It would distract them.”

“Everyone else is supposed to be distracting them from us,” Draco objected. “Who cares about some muggleborn when we have a war to fight?”

Harry, Hermione, and Ron shared glances. Hermione and Ron’s looks seemed to suggest that Draco was Harry’s bright idea, and he could deal with this.
“Er. So, about the power of friendship,” Harry started, and ducked as Draco threw a rock at his head.

“The power of friendship,” Harry continued, straightening up again to Draco’s glare, “Encompasses all mankind. You can’t just turn it off and on for some people or other people. It’s about, uh. What’s the word?”

“Empathy,” Hermione added helpfully.

“Empathy,” Harry continued, picking up his sentence. “So we care about people locked up going mad because they’re locked up going mad and they don’t deserve to. It doesn’t matter if it’s – if it’s – prudent.”

That’s what Voldemort had thought, in that dream-memory of murdering Harry’s mother. He hadn’t needed to kill her; it had just seemed prudent.

Harry was never, ever going to be a prudent person. Not if it killed him. He rather bore a grudge against the entire concept, at this point.

“You’re all crazy,” Draco said flatly. “And I am having nothing to do with you.”

“We’ve got the magic sword on our side,” Harry pointed out easily and imprudently. “And the power of friendship.”

“You’re doing this to taunt me, but I am a man of breeding. I will not be taunted. Nor will I ever choose to believe that we should waste our time with the muck of Azkaban.”

Harry smiled easily, and decided to take the opportunity to tackle Draco into the snow. Punching Draco’s face in sounded like a delightful way to pass the time.

He nicked Draco’s wand, too, while he was at it, despite Draco’s hissing. There. Problem, as the saying went, solved.
Despite his and Draco’s attempts to pull each other’s hair out in an adult and manly fashion, Harry found himself aligned with Draco by default, because Ron and Hermione, reunited, were engaged in some sort of odd ritual avoidance game where neither looked directly at the other but each was constantly aware of the other, like a live wire.

“Do you know what’s up with them?” Harry asked Draco, who was busy being a cat and sitting in his lap rumbling grumpily. Draco hopped down to the cold snowy ground and turned back into a human, eyeing Harry without favor.

“You’re so emotionally stunted, Potter.”

“Answer the question, Draco,” Harry said, using Draco’s wand to cast a wordless hover charm and float for a few moments seated in midair. Not flight, and not as smooth as his own wand. At least without his wand Draco had ceased his particularly disturbing mouse experiments.

“They’re courting,” Draco said flatly. “You do know what that is, don’t you?”

“Of course I know what dating is.”

“I’ve dated Pansy and loads of people. What about you?”

“Professor – ah. Professor Snape said I had to choose between potions and courting people.”

“And you chose potions. Of course.”

“Once I’ve got my mastery I’ll have time,” Harry said, feeling obscurely defensive. “It’s not like there’s much time for kissing and things right now, you know.”

Draco turned back into a cat and sat on him again. Harry could tell this meant the conversation was over, but not what Draco’s opinion of it had been. Sighing, he stroked Draco’s ears and decided not to worry about it too hard. After all, he might die before it became a problem.

Always look on the bright side.

In the distance from inside the tent, Harry heard Hermione and Ron begin to yell at each other. If that was young love, he was almost glad he hadn’t found a way to talk to Ginny properly before the war had crashed down on his head.

#

Ron admitted to having a spare wand he’d gotten off some Snatchers after only a day or so of laughing at Draco’s face when Harry used his, and Harry switched to using the blackthorn wand reluctantly. It didn’t feel as friendly in his hand as Draco’s wand had, and Harry had a nasty feeling it’d be better for curses than it was for making unicorn potions or hovering. Still, they all needed to be armed when going out in the world, and they needed to go visit the Lovegoods. No one was sure whether Greg would be there, and if so, whose side he would be on. Better, far better, to be on their guard, but they had no other clue about Grindewald’s mark and Harry was feeling the pressure of knowing how pleased Voldemort had been with his clue.

There was also the possibility of talking to Luna about how they could sneak into the school – if someone in the school opened the passage of the Room of Requirement at the right time, perhaps, it
would be safe enough, but still dangerous.

It came up as they searched for Luna’s cottage that Ron had not gone home for Christmas – he had been too nervous about missing Harry, and too busy with his refugees, teaching them all the spells to hide and move and hide again – just until You-Know-Who was dealt with, he would tell them, he explained to the group. They’d be home in no time, with him and Harry on the job.

“Did that work?” Harry asked, morbidly curious.

“Better than telling them we were making it up as we went along,” said Ron. “I see what you mean about this heroing lark, finally. It always looks better from outside, doesn’t it?”

Harry grinned, but they’d reached the Lovegood house and it was time to put on his serious face. They knocked on the thick black door, three times.

Greg Goyle opened the door, and everyone held very still for a long moment.

“Let us in, Greg,” Draco snapped, voice low, cool, and absolutely certain that he would be obeyed.

Silent, expressionless, huge (had Greg always been this huge?), the Death Eater stepped back and left room for them to come into the house.

Harry kept his new wand out and didn’t turn his back on Greg. Hermione, Ron, and Draco did the same, Draco coming in last, and pausing within arm’s length of Greg. Draco’s expression was very cold, very haughty, very empty.

“Give me your wand, Greg. To avoid misunderstandings,” said Draco.

After a long, silent pause, but not that long if you knew how long it took Greg to finish a thought, Greg offered Draco his wand and Draco pocketed it in a blur of motion.

“Gregory?” asked the querulous voice of Mr. Lovegood. “Who is it? Friends, or, ah, friends?”

“It’s Harry Potter, sir,” said Greg, in a loud rumble. “And his friends.”

“Oh. Ah.” Mr. Lovegood came in, looking much worse, much more tired, than he had at the Weasley wedding. “We’d better have some tea, then.”

And despite Mr. Lovegood’s shaky nerves and Greg’s best imitation of a stone statue, they did indeed have tea in the cluttered living room, and they talked about Gellert Grindewald, his mark, and the Deathly Hallows.

“…Mr. Lovegood?” Harry asked, after a while. “Where’s Luna?”

“Oh,” said Mr. Lovegood. “Upstairs. She was having a lie down, considering. She hasn’t been… she’s been….”

“Considering what?” Harry asked, leaning forward. “Is she okay?”

Mr. Lovegood twisted his hands together in his lap, and said nothing.

“Hello, Harry,” said Luna’s dreamy voice from the stairs. Harry turned to look at her, and froze. She was wearing a blue silk robe spangled with stars and star earrings, practically normal for Luna. Her blonde hair was still that eerie, icy straight she’d borrowed from Draco’s mother.

And on her head, in a shade of blue matching her robe precisely, Luna was wearing a tiara set with
blue stones.
Twilight had come on while they were talking about fairy tales and thinking about invisibility cloaks, so it was probably just the light that cast Luna in shadows. Harry stood up, remembered to breathe, and smiled as if nothing was wrong.

“Hey, Luna. I was beginning to get worried about you.”

“I thought you would,” she said, and finished coming down the stairs to stand next to Greg, putting a hand on his arm. “That’s why I stayed here, so you could find me.”

Harry’s thoughts were a very quiet scream, and he ignored them with all the hard-won skill of his Occlumency.

“That’s a very nice tiara,” he said. “Can I see it?”

“I thought I would show it to you when I first found it,” Luna said, “But I’m not sure I should now.”

“Why’s that?” Harry asked, casually going to look out the front window. Luna and Greg’s eyes followed him.

“It doesn’t like you,” Luna explained. “And I’ve been trying to make it happy with moonbeams and cakes.”

Harry turned to stare at her, and did not look over her shoulder towards the other end of the room.

“You’ve been trying to befriend the, ah. The diadem of Ravenclaw.”

One of Voldemort's horcruxes, and she was trying to make friends. Hadn’t she been paying attention to what happened to Ginny?

“Oh, yes,” Luna said earnestly. “It was only logical.”

“Luna – you do remember what happened to Ginny?”

“Yes, Harry,” Luna said. “But I’m more worried about what is happening to Ginny, now, and it says it can help. We do really need help, Harry.”

It was at this point that three stunning spells, aimed by Hermione, Draco, and Ron, hit Luna, Greg, and the erumpent horn on the wall, which promptly exploded.

Fragments of wood and paper and rubble flew in all directions, along with an impenetrable cloud of thick white dust. Harry flew through the air, then crashed to the floor, unable to see as debris rained upon him, his arms over his head. He heard Hermione’s scream, Ron’s yell, and a series of sickening metallic thuds which told him that Xenophilius had been blasted off his feet and fallen backward down the spiral stairs.

Half buried in rubble, Harry tried to raise himself. He could barely breathe or see for dust.

Half of the ceiling had fallen in and the end of Luna's bed was hanging through the hole.

The bust of Rowena Ravenclaw lay beside him with half its face missing fragments of torn parchment were floating through the air, and most of the printing press lay on its side, blocking the top of the staircase to the kitchen.
A couple different white-covered figures were still moving around. One, Hermione, came to dig Harry out. After a few moments, the beginnings of spells from downstairs started to unblock the stairs. Harry coughed, dust clogging his throat, and started working on digging himself out as well.

In short order, they were once again arrayed in much the same places in the living room, aside from Luna and Greg being unconscious and the whole place being a pile of rubble. Hermione had stuffed the diadem into her beaded bag.

“Mr. Lovegood,” Harry said, since no one else seemed ready to talk. “What did Luna mean, what’s happening to Ginny now?”

“Oh, well. Perhaps I shouldn’t say, Luna wasn’t sure it was right to involve you. Very busy, you are, Mr. Potter…. The Hallows, wasn’t it? I could certainly see how the elder wand would be useful right about now….”

“Mr. Lovegood,” Harry said more firmly, “Tell me what’s happened to Ginny. Right now.”

“She and that other friend of Luna’s distracted the Death Eaters, as I understand it,” Mr. Lovegood mumbled. “While Luna and Greg went looking for that extraordinary, er, artifact. She said you wanted it?”

“I do want it,” Harry said evenly. “Which other friend?”

“Neville Longbottom, I believe. Poor lad, Luna says he never had much nerve. I imagine Azkaban will be quite trying for him.”

The bottom fell out of Harry’s world, and a roaring beast came alive within him screaming ‘no, no, no.’ He was struck dumb, too tempted to lash out, to shout, to scream at Mr. Lovegood who certainly was not to blame.

Harry couldn’t protect anyone.

“Neville and my sister are in Azkaban?” Ron asked, very heavily.

“Yes, yes. That is what I said, isn’t it?” Mr. Lovegood said rather haughtily. “Terrible times we live in, terrible times. But I kept telling Luna, no good getting yourself killed going after them. Haven’t we already had enough trouble? She has to think about herself, Mr. Potter, you must see that.”

Harry wasn’t sure why Mr. Lovegood was looking at him. He wasn’t sure what his own expression was like, but it seemed to make Mr. Lovegood quail.

“You’d better wake Luna and Greg up,” Harry said. “Um – take her wand, just in case.”

Hermione obeyed, a dust-white ghost with a rock-steady wand, and both were promptly enervated. With a great deal more energy to her tone Luna said, “Well, daddy, I did tell you that horn was unlucky.”

Harry snorted quietly, and asked, “Alright, Luna?”

“Oh, fine. I am feeling a great decrease in wrackspurt activity.”

Harry translated that as ‘less dark and crazy.’

“Um – can you two tell me what happened? Or – no. I suppose the most important part is what happened to Ginny and Neville.”
What happened to Ginny and Neville was, it turned out, much as Mr. Lovegood had explained, and the whole party migrated down to the kitchen by common agreement, for dinner and to avoid rooms with holes in the ceiling. There was dinner, which tasted like nothing and felt like lead in Harry’s stomach.

He couldn’t escape the visual – Ginny and Neville taunting the Carrows and Snape with a carefully orchestrated string of traps, not stopping even when they’d been sighted, running, running, not towards any safety but just away, to give Luna the few moments she needed to search the Room of Lost Things that Greg had told her about for the item that Harry, *Harry*, had been careless enough to speak about.

“Where was Greg in all this?” Draco asked, sounding far too calm on an evening when Harry’s world was breaking into pieces, because he couldn’t go running off to save Ginny this time, he had a mission, but he- his thoughts circled and stalled. Neville, confronting him about going to get the Philosopher’s Stone. Ginny, hair brilliant red, flying on a broomstick. Neville in the DA, relentless and focused. Ginny in the Chamber of Secrets, fallen, white and silent.

“Greg was off duty,” Luna said, “But he was on duty later when I came out of the Room.”

Luna didn’t continue, seeming content to eat her peas, sticking them to her knife with mashed potatoes.

“Greg?” prompted Draco.

“Luna came out. Vince and I were there. He wanted to turn her in, so I killed him.”

Silence stretched, vast and cloying and awful. Mr. Lovegood knocked over the salt as he reached for it with a trembling hand.

“Well,” said Draco, and Harry knew he was white-faced under his coating of white dust. “What did you do with the body?”

“Luna helped me turn it into a vase,” Greg said. “…is that okay?”

Draco pressed his hands to his face, eyes closed for a long moment, then opened them. They were clear, flat, and hard, like grey stone.

“Good job, Greg,” Draco said. “Very good job. It’s a war, after all. He *was* on the other side.”

“Thought so,” Greg said, and his shoulders settled from menacing looming back to their default slouch. Luna leaned her forehead against his shoulder and Harry saw tears painting lines in the dust on her cheeks. He looked away.

This evening could not get any worse.

Ron put his knife and fork down, and said, “Right. I’m going to go get my sister out of Azkaban. None of the rest of you should come, but I thought you should know.”
Jumping Off a Cliff Together

“What do you mean none of the rest of us should come, Ronald Weasley?” asked Hermione.

“Well, I mean. You’ve got to keep going with the, ah, the war,” Ron said, with an uneasy look at Mr. Lovegood as the most obvious person not to be told about horcruxes. “I’ve been useless so far, you don’t need me.”

“If you think for one moment that I will let you go off to Azkaban without me I will set you on fire, Ron.”

Ron, sensibly, shut up. Harry did too, though he felt faintly cheered by Hermione threatening to set people on fire. It was homey. (Oh, wait, that was being near a horcrux. Nevermind, everything was awful.)

“But of course we’re going too,” said Luna. “I’ve been researching for weeks. Did you know that it was founded in the fifteenth century? It has a very fascinating history. Eldritch Diggory—”

“I don’t need any help,” Ron said sturdily.

“Do you even know where Azkaban is?” asked Hermione.

“Er.”

“It’s in the North Sea,” put in Luna. “I have the most tremendous variety of maps up in my room.”

Harry found himself left downstairs as the group, chattering and arguing, tromped upstairs through the ruined sitting room to retrieve maps and discuss dark creatures. Did they think he wasn’t coming?

Not that he particularly wanted to travel to an island in the North Sea to fight dementors, admittedly, but—

He followed them upstairs, Mr. Lovegood forgotten, and grabbed Ron’s arm, dragging him off into a little corner of the hallway to glare at his red-headed friend.

“You know I’m coming, right?”

“No,” said Ron. “You can’t.”

“You never let me leave you behind for anything. I’m coming.”

“You aren’t. You’ve got a mission, you’ve got You-Know-Who.”

“The diadem was the last one but the snake,” Harry said very quietly, “It’s almost over, and we have the sword for that. I’m coming, Ron. You aren’t getting there without me.”

“Sure we are. Luna’s got a plan, doesn’t she?”

“The one she made under the influence of the diadem? Whereas I have Sirius Black, the only man to actually get out of Azkaban? So he knows some stuff about it, like where it is and how to get there? Defenses?”

“You don’t have to come with us to ask him that stuff.”
“And yet I won’t ask him without that,” Harry said, feeling cold and like he’d spent the past seven years spending too much time talking to Slytherins. “I won’t let you, Ron.”

“You’re joking.”

“I care about them too, Ron,” Harry said, trying for something smoother, gentler. “Do you know what it would be like for me, staying behind? I can’t. Please, Ron.”

Ron shot him an uncomfortable look, and went back to the discussion in Luna’s bedroom. Harry followed the group example and took a seat on a corner of non-collapsed floor, accepting a history book of dark wizards and their lairs through the ages, and thought furiously about horcruxes and Azkaban and diversions and Hallows.

#

In the end, Draco’s absolute refusal to go on any daring rescue mission without Harry tipped the balance in Harry’s favor. Draco’s reasoning, he would admit to Harry in a private moment later, was stupid faith that Harry actually did have ‘magical Boy Who Lived powers’ and Draco would hex Harry’s eyebrows off if Harry told anyone. Draco, the only animagus of the group, was the one who’d be able to slip past guards without getting his soul sucked out of his mouth.

As Luna pointed out, helpfully, with a sixteenth century diagram of soul sucking.

Harry’s point about Sirius being their best bet also seemed sound.

“The thing is,” Ron said heavily. “I can hear my mum now. She’d say – she’d say that she can’t risk losing two kids. That I’m the youngest and I can’t be trusted with something grown wizards should be doing. That I was being selfish.”

Harry had to admit, he thought to himself, that sounded exactly like Mrs. Weasley. He had to wonder, if the Ministry hadn’t fallen, would he still be tidily diverted by changing sheets in a safehouse somewhere, rather than out fighting werewolves and nearly getting himself blown up?

“If we contacted the Order,” Hermione said cautiously, “They’d help, wouldn’t they?”

“Most of them would,” Harry admitted. “But I don’t know that bringing more people would help. We’re not trying to draw attention, are we? Just sneak in and out.”

“The thing is….” Hermione trailed off.

“The thing is?” Harry asked.

“We keep doing this, coming up with little clear plans without complications, and then we don’t have a plan for when it blows up into a big complicated – well, mess.”

“Let me talk to Sirius,” Harry said, after uneasy glances had gone around the circle. “He’ll have some ideas.”

#

“Sirius.”

“Hey, Harry.”

Sirius sounded tired, and Harry felt guilty. Not that he’d ever stopped feeling guilty. They went through the normal routine of verifying their identities, and then Harry got down to it.
“...hypothetically-“

“Let me stop you right there. I don’t really have much time tonight, Harry, so just – tell me what you need.”

“A way to break into Azkaban,” Harry said, and tried not to feel hurt by the abruptness.

Sirius was staring at him from the tiny mirror. It was very uncomfortable.

“Into… Azkaban.”

“Yeah. Ah – there’s lots of people locked up in there. We need to get them out, before they all go mad and die. Or die and go mad, no, definitely go mad and then die – Luna found some really awful suicide statistics-“

“Harry.”

“Sorry.”

“Harry, where are you? This is something we should talk about in person.”

“…do you mean you want to knock me on the head and lock me in a closet?” Harry asked suspiciously.

“Yes. I do mean I want to knock you on the head and lock you in a closet. Harry, this is crazy.”

“They’ve locked up Ron’s sister,” Harry said flatly. “He’s going, so I’m going. You can-“ no, he didn’t want to yell at Sirius. “I need your help.”

“They say you’re supposed to count to ten and calm down at times like this,” Sirius said in a quiet, deadly tone, “But I don’t think parenting books really cover your teenager wanting to commit suicide via masses of dementors.”

Harry had nothing he could really say to that, and so he was silent.

“No,” Sirius said, and the mirror went blank, empty, and dead.

It had never actually occurred to Harry until that moment that he could call Sirius and Sirius wouldn’t help him with a problem. It probably should have. After all, wasn’t Harry always alone with his problems in the very end?

Still, he stared at the little mirror in silence for a while before going back into the light and noise to tell his friends they were alone.
Dark Clouds, Silver Lining

You couldn’t Apparate to Azkaban. The nearest land to it was a jutting peninsula just barely closer than the rest of the coast, and according to Luna’s research, made of low, rocky cliffs. Her weather report suggested that the weather would be snowy and miserable, and that broomsticks were their best bet.

There didn’t seem much else to say. Sirius, the most reasonable member of the Order about underage or nearly-underage wizardry, had cut them off cold. They planned all the next day, despite Mr. Lovegood’s pleas, and Apparated to the nearest place one of them had been, a little northern market town. From there it was disillusionment and shared broomsticks and quiet desperation.

They touched down on the snowy cliff for a rest, right next to a mound of snow-covered boulders. Harry ran a hand through wind-tossed and snow-laden hair and looked out to sea and sighed.

“I’ve probably done stupider things than this,” he told the sea.

“Not as far as I know,” said Sirius, from just behind him. Harry jumped just about out of his skin, whirling, wand in hand. Sirius raised empty hands, and smiled, eyes shadowed in the evening twilight. Behind him, the snowy boulder roused, shaking out feathery wings.

“I brought transport?” Sirius asked, as Buckbeak nudge him with a huge feathered head. “Forgive me?”

Harry tackled him, arms wrapping around the man desperately, and tried very hard to pretend he wasn’t crying.

“I came ashore here,” Sirius said, wrapping his arms around Harry and holding on tight. “So I figured… if you were going to go….”

“That,” Harry said, muffled by Sirius’ coat, “Was almost as stupid a plan as mine.”

“Not quite that bad,” said Sirius gently. “We don’t have to do this, Harry.”

“Sure, we do,” said Harry. “Some things are worth doing, aren’t they?”

“…I either did something really wrong with you or really right, but you’re probably not my fault either way. C’mon, let’s talk to your friends.”

And Sirius wrapped an arm around Harry’s shoulders and they went to talk to Harry’s friends, who were mostly covered in friendly hippogriffs. Draco, Harry noticed, was standing very still.

“You’re not actually frightened of hippogriffs, are you?” Harry asked him.

“Of course not,” Draco said stiffly. Which was Draco for ‘very much yes.’

“Hello, Mr. Black,” said Hermione. “I think there was some confusion, we almost left without you.”

“Well,” Sirius said. “I had to fetch a few things, but I’m ready now. Hippogriffs should get us there in a few hours, and then it’s mostly a matter of casting enough patroni. I assume we’re having Draco and Greg play the part of our Death Eater overlords?”

Hermione nodded.
“The Dark Mark should get us through as authorized visitors, as long as we move quickly. Dementors aren’t clever.”

“No,” Sirius said. “They’re not.”

“Oh, of course, sir, I didn’t mean to say that you didn’t know about Dementors – will you be okay?”

“I’ll be fine.”

That was how Sirius sounded when he was lying.

It continued to snow lightly as they set out for the island, each bundled onto their own hippogriff with an equal number of hippogriffs flying around them as part of the flock. The sea was dark and choppy far below, and looked very cold.

Harry could really have used a dose of calming draught, but even simple spells like the summoning charm felt wrong somehow with this strange wand. Easier not to use it, if he had the choice. Better to focus on the task ahead, and not worry about his own mood.

#

The island loomed suddenly out of the night ahead, a chill in the air that had nothing to do with snow down the back of your neck, a rocky coastline that was a darker line of black against black waters, and a tower that was, just for a change, in case you thought we were going for a theme here, black.

Harry thought he might write a firmly worded letter to the newspapers about dark wizards’ design sense. Really, hadn’t they ever heard of dark green? Dark purple? Dark blue? Dark red, even, just to go along with the blood and death theme. It was just so monochrome.

They landed on the island accompanied by Hermione’s little otter, and dismounted from the herd in a jumble of rocks on the shore. There was a narrow clear path of (black) stone leading up to the blocky tower (still black), in between jumbles of snowy vines covering the slopes of the hill.

To add insult to injury, the vines were black too.

Sirius and Draco shifted, and Draco hopped up onto Sirius’s shaggy back, a little white shape against dark fur. Greg put on a hood, for the full Death Eater look, and Hermione and Harry attempted to look downtrodden and submissive.

They started up towards the tower of Azkaban, and this was still a terrible idea.

In the end, it actually almost went well. They ordered the Dementors to show them Neville and Ginny and they got Neville and Ginny’s wands. Neville was pale and had red marks on his arms where he’d tried to take the skin off, but was able to stand and come with them. Ginny uncurled from her crouch in her dismal cell when Ron’s terrier nosed at her.

The problem was as they were all walking slowly back towards the entrance of the tower, as if moving slowly would mean the dementors watching them and swirling slowly past wouldn’t notice they were there.

The problem was this.

“Please, please, someone, anyone! Please, let me out, I haven’t done anything – please, I didn’t steal, I just want my husband, my husband Reg, he works at the ministry, please!”
The group ground to a halt, and silent glances were exchanged. Draco’s ears were back flat on his head, but he didn’t shift back to human shape to argue. Sirius seemed… if dogs could talk, Sirius would be saying ‘I knew this would happen and I am resigned to my fate.’

“Please, I’ll do anything, please!”

She wasn’t the only one screaming, Harry realized. It wasn’t the wind. She was just the only one coherent enough to use words.


As a group, they cast their patronus charms, and a stag, an otter, a terrier, a hare, a flare of silver mist, a kitten, and a horse appeared in blazes of silver light, and charged.

Harry had never much liked the concept of Azkaban anyway.
An Inconvenient Realization

They could beat back the Dementors and free the prisoners. Sirius had brought a pile of spare wands for those who had had their wands confiscated, and they taught the Patronus by the silvery light of their own charms as dawn turned the clouds pearly grey. Harry, who everyone seemed to feel was too important to lose, spent his day teaching instead of fighting. He heard snatches of it as he bucked up shaking prisoners with chocolate and yelling, gave them wands and pointed them at the enemy. Neville shouting, “All the vines are Venomous Tentacula, drive the Dementors back into them!”

Sirius swearing.

Draco coming by with clear fresh water and a green mess that tasted like death but made Harry’s nerves buzz.

“What’s this?” Harry asked, drinking his goop.

“Food,” Draco said flatly.

“Oh, good,” Harry said, and after a glance at Draco’s expression, didn’t ask any questions.

The problem, Harry found at a hurried council of war however many hours later, was simple arithmetic. You couldn’t apparate out of Azkaban. It was on the Floo network but only connected to the Ministry, which was suicidal. They had eighteen hippogriffs, all of which needed rest and food between snow-tossed trips over the North Sea, and almost three hundred prisoners, with 56 wands between them to keep enough patronus charms going to keep out what Hermione estimated as more than five hundred Dementors. The Dementors seemed happy to circle the island, waiting.

Waiting.

It was a stalemate, if an active one. Harry taught and cast his stag at the enemy and tried to catch naps in the deepest heart of the castle, where the walls seemed to bleed but at least the air didn’t freeze the soul out of you.

Around noon, a patronus failed in the face of a cluster of Dementors just as they were sending another set of prisoners off across the sea, and five of the former prisoners died quietly, souls slipping from them as if stolen by the icy wind off the choppy water.

The venomous tentaculas looked on, and had no opinion. Harry cast another patronus, and tried to ignore the way his favorite good memory of dinner with Sirius was beginning to feel strange and pale, like a dream of a memory, rather than an actual memory.

As the day wore on, his scar began to hurt more and more, an ache that became a burn.

It didn’t seem like the thing to mention to grim-faced Hermione or ferocious Ron or Neville, doing his best to blast Dementors into the sea. Harry gritted his teeth and bore it, remembering his father’s fierce upright stance as he faced down death for his family and concentrating on love.

Night came up, and Harry let Hermione tell him where to sleep and when to wake up. The exhaustion wearing deep into his bones was less about the effort of the spell and more about the wear of the Dementors presence, even through the Patronus charms. Everything felt like the worst thing.

He woke up the next morning and went to sit in one of the third-story windows and cast his stag, harrying the Dementors back away from the building lazily while he watched the sky for the return
of the hippogriff flock. The sky was clear, for a change, a high, cold, pale blue that reminded Harry distantly of Voldemort’s laughter.

He stared idly at the snitch he’d gotten from Dumbledore, which he was now certain held the Resurrection Stone, and wondered if Voldemort had found the Elder Wand yet.

“Hermione’s looking for you,” said Greg from behind him, and Harry flinched, snitch flying into the air and snatched back out of it in one motion.

“Geeze, Greg. I came up here to be alone for a few minutes, you know?”

“Luna says it’s not good to be alone.”

“…well, no. But I wanted to anyway. Needed to clear my head. Think about the war.”

“Got to survive this, first.”

“Yeah, I know. I know.”

“We should leave them here and go.”

Harry turned fully to look at Greg, half in shadows with the light coming in from behind Harry. It was just another cell, now blasted open. There was nothing interesting about this room at all, aside from its good view of the landing patch down by the beach.

“Maybe we should,” Harry admitted. “But we’re not going to. Not while there are good people here to save.”

He was, admittedly, leaving the murderers and madmen behind. He didn’t feel good about it, but you had to make choices, didn’t you?

“Draco and I talked about whether we could stun you all and drag you out,” Greg said. “But we figure we can’t lift you and keep the Dementors off, and we might have to fight off the rest of the prisoners.”

“That’s….” Harry laughed, feeling suddenly lighter than he had all night. “That’s so entirely predictable I could cry, Greg.”

He rather thought Greg smiled.

“What’s Hermione want, then?” Harry asked.

“Talk about how to ease the load on the rotations, keep the failure during take-off from happening again.”

The failure. It was a nice clean way to talk about five people getting their souls eaten in front of you.

“Right. Tell her I’ll be down in a few minutes, after my patronus is done chasing them around down there.”

Greg nodded, and turned to go. Harry leaned back in the window ledge, drawing one knee up in front of him. Something was bothering him about this, if he could just put his finger on why….

“Greg? How’d you find me up here?”

“You’re easy to find,” Greg said, turning back. “Just have to go the way that feels like night time.
Like the tiara, or the necklace.”

And with those words, Greg left, Harry staring after him.

Like the tiara, or the necklace.

How had Dumbledore explained it, all those years ago, when they’d been discussing the Chamber of Secrets? It hadn’t seemed important at the time. Harry sank into his own mind, the sea of memories hidden behind his wings of phoenix fire (love) shielding his mind, and sank fishhooks into the memory he sought.

“...Unless I’m much mistaken, he transferred some of his own powers to you the night he gave you that scar. Not something he intended to do, I’m sure...”

“Voldemort put a bit of himself in me?” Harry said, thunderstruck.

“It certainly seems so.”

Dumbledore had told him at twelve and Harry hadn’t even paid attention. How much else had Dumbledore told Harry and then thought Harry had known, because Dumbledore assumed Harry was clever, like him and Hermione, not ordinary like Ron? Harry didn’t think this way, he hadn’t known, he hadn’t thought-

Like the tiara. Like the necklace. Like Nagini.

No wonder Dumbledore had gone to so much effort to find stories about how to beat death, when he was asking Harry to die. Puppet strings, it was all puppet strings. Should he just – he should just die, shouldn’t he? It was safest for everyone. He’d have to eventually.

Harry took a shaky breath, and kissed the snitch for luck. He’d just have to make his death count for something.

His patronus, unnoticed on the rocky, vine-covered slope below, shuddered and vanished in a flare of silver light.
Azkaban Hurts the Soul

Professor Snape would not want me to throw my life away, Harry told himself firmly. It had been the one defining point of their relationship, the touchstone against which Harry had built the rest of his life. Professor Snape wanted him alive. He couldn’t just walk up to Voldemort and say ‘hello, why don’t you destroy your last horcrux today?’

Or, no. There was still the diadem and Nagini. Why hadn’t he destroyed the diadem yet? It had just… slipped his mind. Slipped everyone’s minds.

Voldemort, Harry thought tiredly, was a tricky person. He’d have to remember to destroy it before he died. Which would not be today, he scolded himself as he trudged down the winding stone staircase. There wasn’t any point to him dying today. Professor Snape wouldn’t like it.

“Hey, Hermione,” he said, summoning up a smile. “How’s it going down here?”

She was surrounded by people, as usual, order spreading from her in a wave of intimidating efficiency. Ron and his terrier stood at her right hand, guarding her back.

“Harry! Oh, you look like death. Have some chocolate.”

She thrust a chocolate bar into his hands and he ate it mechanically. Some of the feeling of being tainted lifted, but he still felt strange and otherworldly, only loosely tethered to the ground. Would he float away if he wasn’t careful, as if caught up in a flight spell?

“Before I forget again, Hermione, can I get the diadem from you?” he asked.

“Oh, sure,” she said, distractedly. “I suppose you should have it, since you’re the one looking for them.”

The diadem, Harry noticed with dark amusement, was definitely messing with their heads. Hermione handed it over without a whisper, and the pain in his scar seemed to redouble the moment he touched it.

Right. That wouldn’t do. He had planned to just destroy it, but….

With a grimace of distaste at using his new blackthorn wand, he accio’d a square of spider silk and milkweed fiber pressed into felt and wrapped the diadem with jerky motions, reluctance scraping at the edges of his mind like black, broken fingernails.

The sensation faded as it was completely wrapped up in silk. Harry sighed, and looked at Hermione, whose gaze seemed a little less fierce. Hermione, he was reminded, would make a terrible Dark Lady. If glorious.

“What should I be doing?” he asked her, tucking the diadem into his pocket and eyeing the Sword of Gryffindor strapped to Ron’s back. Where had Ron gotten a sword sheath, anyway? It looked very natural. When had his friends grown up?

Harry didn’t feel grown up enough to die. Funny.

Harry took another stubborn bite of chocolate.

“Teaching again,” she said apologetically. “We’re keeping everyone who can make a reasonable
Patronus here longest, but everyone’s tired. If you could get a few more to make that step towards a corporeal patronus—“

“I’ll do my best,” he promised. A job was good. A job wasn’t letting his thoughts eat themselves like some mythological Norse serpent. “What’s the schedule like on the evacuation?”

“We should be able to get another hundred off the island today,” she said, eyes bright and false.

Harry narrowed his eyes at her, and she shook her head slightly, eyes darting to their anxious audience of recently released muggleborn adults. Oh. Right. Causing a panic really would kill them all, because a patronus was all about attitude….

“Sounds good,” Harry said cheerily. “Come see me when you have a minute, will you? Hardly had time to think in this mess, and I could use an assistant teacher.”

“I’ll do that, Harry,” Hermione promised.

Harry cleared his mind of everything but happiness, and taught the patronus charm as if nothing was wrong. Occlumency was, after all, good for something.

#

“So,” Harry said in a dark corner of the interior courtyard of Azkaban they were using for teaching, looking at Hermione and Sirius, “How bad is it?”

Morning was passing on, and noon was fast approaching.

“Skye McCloud, a witch with an affinity for weather, told me this morning that there’d be a storm rolling in this afternoon,” Hermione said very quietly. “She went with the last group. The hippogriffs aren’t coming back until it clears, which could be the day after tomorrow. There’s too much chance of us losing them.”

Well, that was sufficiently awful.

“Ten minutes ago,” she went on, “More Dementors started coming out of the sea. They must have some way to communicate – they called back the ones who were traveling around nearby to provide reinforcements.”

What was Harry talking about, obviously it wasn’t sufficiently awful. For once in his life, Harry Potter had nothing to say.

“Sirius,” Hermione plowed on, “Has a portkey for you, for sunset tonight. He made it up before coming out here. So… we’ll stay here to take care of things, and you’ll get on with the job.”

Oh, Merlin. No.

“You’re going,” Sirius growled. “If I have to stun you and tie you to the Portkey. It’ll take you to Shell Cottage, where there are Weasleys to sit on you.”

No. No, no, no.

“We know you want to stay,” Hermione said gently. “But we’ll be fine here, really. We might have to – have to come to a compromise, but the war will be over soon. And then things will be fine.”

“You mean… locking yourselves in. For Dementors to feed on. Sort of a – voluntary buffet.”
Hermione paled, her lips thinned, but her eyes were steady. Sirius was staring off into the middle distance at nothing at all.

“Better than not having iron bars between us and them, Harry,” she said quietly. “I’ll arrange everything, just – try not to worry. That’s just the backup plan, there’s tons more to do before it comes to that.”

Harry ran a hand over his face and wondered if she’d gone crazy, or if he had. Try not to worry.

“How do I know you haven’t gone crazy?” he asked, after Hermione had given him a watery smile and rushed off to whatever her next item on her checklist was.

“If I’d been there to die for James, I would have,” Sirius said quietly. “I wasn’t. Least I can do is this, now. Get you out of here.”

“Come with me, Sirius. You can’t stay here.”

“And why am I any more worthy than your friends? Than anyone else here? How’d we choose?”

How, indeed.

“I’m not more worthy,” Harry snarled, desperation making him want to hit the man.

“You’ve got to face him,” Sirius said flatly. “For James. For Lily. For Peter, even, the little rat. He wasn’t always bad. You’ll do that, won’t you?”

Would he? Would Sirius ask it of him, if Sirius knew? Would Sirius hate him, if Sirius knew?

Harry took a slow breath, summoned up a smile, and lied.

“You’re right, Sirius. Nothing else I can do, is there.”
“What time is the portkey?” Harry asked, not bothering to act too innocent. He was resentful as hell, and Sirius would be suspicious if he didn’t act it.

“Five.”

There wasn’t much else to say. Harry absently summoned a packet of mints, and ate those instead of lunch. It wasn’t as if the goo Neville had created from the local flora appealed to him today.

Somewhere far away, Voldemort was very angry, and an emotion Harry couldn’t recognize in him. It felt almost like… grief? Except Voldemort was not the sort of man to grieve. The pain felt like being stabbed in the head, like it would split open any moment.

“I’ll talk to you later, then,” Harry said, and hoped Sirius thought he was angry, not that he was in pain. He needed to find – ah, here was a dismal nook, underneath a dank stone staircase. He leaned against damp black stone and tried to catch his breath. There had to be a way out of this, he had to see a way out of this that wasn’t… if only he could think…

He didn’t know, later, how long he stayed there, caught up in his thoughts running in circles and the blinding headache. Eventually, he fumbled a bottle of sleeping potion from his pocket and drank it in two swift swallows.

He slumped against the wall and let his mind drift off to sleep, and Voldemort.

#

They were kneeling on a stone floor, chanting a long series of spells over Nagini. Harry took a moment to see why, and he was torn between chagrin and happiness. The long, ragged wound that Ron had sliced into her side, nearly taking her head off, had grown black edges and had deepened, until he could see bone. It was gruesome, and she held unnaturally still as Voldemort cast again, and again. He didn’t notice Harry at all, the slender wand in his hand with the pattern of berries along its length dancing to his hissing tune.

Voldemort, Harry realized with dull resignation, had the Elder Wand. Wasn’t that just typical of today? There went that half-formed plan that Dumbledore had left for him. Being the Master of Death had sounded nice. Reassuring, like he actually had a chance of winning this war and surviving.

What had Sirius said, years ago, when Arthur Weasley had been nearly killed by this very same snake? Some things were worth dying for?

*It would be kinder,* Harry thought aloud, *To put her out of her misery.*

*You.*

Well. Someone was in a bad mood. Harry entirely failed to sympathize.

*I’m serious. It’s just cruel. It’s not like that’s easily cured, you know.*

*And what, precisely, is ‘that’?*

*Don’t you know?*
Basilisk venom. It never hurts to check your answers, Harry.

Harry did not think this was the time for lessons.

I would have thought you’d know your antidotes, Harry commented.

Phoenix tears are not easily obtainable in quantity. Even for me.

It’s really too bad absolute power over Wizarding Britain isn’t really good for much, huh?

“That is quite enough,” Voldemort whispered in that cold, hissing way of his, and Harry realized he probably shouldn’t have been antagonizing his mortal enemy.

Voldemort’s anger was an icy ocean, bottomless, endless.

“You have interfered with my designs for the last time, Harry Potter. And today, you too shall lose something that matters.”

It turned out that they were in the basement of Malfoy Manor, which was apparently where one went for snake care. They climbed up out of the basement in eerie silence. They started walking through the hallway, up the stairs. Harry recognized this hallway and those stairs. They were on the way to Professor Snape’s room.

He’s useful, Harry pointed out worriedly.

Harry, it has probably come to your attention by now that I have a temper. I have other potion masters and other options for the roles I had planned for him. I can indulge myself.

As if Professor Snape was a toy, to be broken when one had a bad day.

But then, that was Voldemort all over, wasn’t it.

Professor Snape was going to die? He couldn’t die, he had to yell at Harry for trying to get himself killed.

They came to the head of the stairs and turned down the corridor towards Professor Snape’s room. They opened the door, and leveled their wand at the figure half-hidden in the bed.

And at that moment, Harry committed to his terrible idea that he had had looking at Sirius just an hour earlier.

Wait, he thought quickly, and Voldemort hesitated, just for a moment. I want to make a deal.

Still, hesitation.

You said I could trade myself for safety for my friends. And family. Harry plowed on into the mental silence, You said it would be a good deal for you, because I keep getting in your way. Wouldn’t you like that? I could just – not be here anymore. To irritate you. Kill him now and you don’t know when you’ll find me again. I could move to South America or something. Australia. Finland.

I’m afraid I don’t believe you, Harry. Not for one man, no matter how much you might care. You are not a fool.

He’s not the only one in danger, Harry thought wildly, quickly, because he knew that fey tone, knew that casual, deadened calm. Voldemort had already decided, he was just playing it out. They all are, I got them into something – something bad. I was stupid. And try though I might to think of a way
around it, I think you’re probably the only person who can help.

Voldemort snorted, a quiet, amused noise. The man in the bed stirred, and sat up.

Their wand was hidden again, as if they had never been two seconds from murder.

“My lord?” asked Snape’s sleep-roughened voice.

“Prepare yourself. We have a mission.”

Snape pulled himself out of bed and Voldemort sat down in an armchair in his sitting room, watching the fire, and steepled his long, pale fingers.

Where am I going, Harry?

It was Harry’s turn to hesitate. Oh, it was only logical, oh, he wasn’t more important than all his friends and the rest of the world, but he didn’t want to die, not really. There was a lot of magic he hadn’t tried and potions he hadn’t made. And even if Snape had once told him, over the creation of wolfsbane, in a cutting, venomous tone, that Voldemort was a man of his word, there was hanging his own life on this and then there was telling Voldemort where to find his friends.

Snape said something and Harry missed it entirely.

My word, Harry, Voldemort thought in his most false, most gentle tone. That upon your death your friends and family’s lives will be spared. I shall not even imprison them. Allow me to show you mercy, Harry.

This wasn’t mercy. But not imprisoned was better than in Azkaban at the mercy of Dementors, and Harry’s life was his own to throw away, if his fragile bridge of logic held, if he wasn’t just Dementor-mad, if he could trust Dumbledore’s never spoken plan and his own instinct to throw it out the window because sometimes life didn’t work out the way you wanted. In that moment, it came down to Harry being unable to watch Voldemort kill anyone else he loved in front of him.

It has to be just you, Harry thought. No Death Eaters, no minions. Just you and me.

I have no reason to accede to this request.

Harry hooked a memory from his own mind and thrust it out past his shields.

Harry, wrapping a tiara set with blue stones in a white silken cloth, and tucking it into his pocket.

How do you feel about bribery? Harry asked, feeling mad and fey and daring.

Harry felt Voldemort’s shock, and then his horror and disbelief.

You think I have a sword impregnated with basilisk venom by accident? Harry challenged. So you have leverage. So do I.

It was interesting to realize what effect madness had on a mind. Everything in Voldemort’s mind seemed scattered, breaking apart and crashing together. His emotions had no tethers to hold them, all was a storm of anger and hatred and not-death-anything-but-death, the lust for power and the fear of pain.

Oh, Harry. What I would like to do to you.
I’m offering you a chance, Harry said, and tried to hide all the emotions he could feel bubbling up and trying to disrupt his occlumency. Take your temper out on me, for once, not whoever’s in front of you. Me and a horcrux, for safety for my friends and family. Do we have a deal?

Your life to spare others my wrath, as well as that which you stole. Yes, Harry, we have a deal. And gently again, Just tell me where, Harry.

I will meet you on the north shore of Azkaban Isle, an hour before sunset. Does that give you enough time to get there?

I can be there much more quickly than that.

No. I need to arrange things here so no one interferes.

What have you gotten yourself into?

I picked a fight with an army of Dementors, mostly.

And dragged all your little friends along for the ride?

Harry really had nothing to say to that.

Heroes, Voldemort thought with grim amusement. So predictable.

You, Harry thought grimly, Are not making my awful day any better.

“You are making a very good decision, Harry,” Voldemort murmured. “Wake up now, and try to relax.”

Harry woke up, put his hands over his face, and held very still for a long time.
A kitten was staring at him. Harry looked up, through dry eyes that burned at the pink nose, drooping whiskers, and perked forward ears of a hunting Draco Malfoy, and indulged an impulse he’d had ever since the first time he saw Draco as a cat.

He scooped him up and cuddled him.

The cat growled, of course.

“Don’t hiss at me. You’re a good friend, you know? Even if we don’t like to admit it.”

The cat stopped hissing, and Harry indulged in stroking the white ears (they pressed back against the cat’s skull) and fluffy fur and adorable tail (which lashed).

“Okay, okay,” Harry said, laughing quietly. “I’ll stop.”

And he put Draco down, stood, stretched, smiled.

“You know where Ron and Hermione are?” he asked Draco, who shook himself all over, flicked his tail, and led the way.

Hermione was outside in what was beginning to be light snow, fighting Dementors with Neville and Ron.

“I’m sorry, Harry, but I don’t have time to argue,” Hermione said tightly, little otter holding off what seemed a solid wave of Dementors. “And it will make me cry, which would be bad, you see.”

Harry hugged her firmly, and she squeaked. What was with everyone today?

“It’s alright, Hermione. You’re just trying to protect me. Can I borrow Ron for a minute?”

Ron glanced at him, glanced away.

“Sure,” she said. “But go back to the tower, you know you have a terrible reaction to Dementors.”

Ron and Harry trudged back up towards the tower in silence. Harry led him into the first empty room he came to, checking absently for stinging things, oozing things, or things on the ceiling that were about to drop on his head to try to eat him. (Azkaban was an interesting place.) This one had already been pretty thoroughly cleared.

“I can’t come with you,” Ron said suddenly. “This is all my fault, I have to stick with her – it.”

“Stick with Hermione,” Harry said firmly. “Have lots of curly-haired babies.”

“…what?”

“When the war’s over. I thought it’d be cute, you know?”

“But you – her-“

“Me, her?” Harry asked as he dug in his pocket.

“I thought you and Hermione… all that time alone….”
“Most of that time alone was with Draco along,” Harry pointed out, finally finding the silk-wrapped tiara and placing it dead-center in the middle of the room. “Whack that with the sword, would you?”

“But it should be you,” Ron said plaintively, apparently about a lot of things.

It really wasn’t the time to argue. Except it really was.

“I’ve found it never pays to overthink things too much, in this heroing lark,” Harry informed him. “Now take out your confusion and terror on the shiny metal thing.”

And Ron hit the tiara with the sword, just as fiercely as he could, and the floor fell in beneath them and launched them into a dungeon full of monsters. Harry indulged in a little swearing, fighting back to back with Ron, and every moment of this memory was going into his vault to use to summon patronus charms as he laughed and fired spells as they blasted the tentacled things and made a run for the stairs upwards.

“…don’t know what they’re talking about,” Ron gasped, back in the clear light of the courtyard, where the snow was coming down thick and fast now. “Azkaban’s frankly cuddly. Great vacation spot. Bring the whole family.”

Sirius was being a dog, laying in the entrance of the tower and growling at everyone who stepped over him. Harry patted his head.

“You’re a ridiculous old man,” he told Sirius comfortably, and sat down and leaned against his warm, shaggy black side. “But that suits me. I’m a ridiculous kid.”

The dog snorted at him.

“Should I kiss Ginny Weasley for luck?”

The dog paused, and turned to look at him. Sirius eyed Harry thoughtfully, and jerked his doggy chin in a nod.

“Great,” Harry said, smiled, and hugged his godfather. Sirius was always somehow easier to hug in dog form.

Harry happened to run into Luna and Greg before he found Ginny, however, so he paused to tell them to look after themselves, and to tell Luna that he’d liked her hair better the other way. She played with a strand of it, eyes not quite focusing on him, as he strode past.

Ginny was taking a break from Azkaban to drink green goop out of a cauldron. There was snow in her long red hair, she was grubby, and she was beautiful.

“Ginny? Can you do me a favor?”

“Sure, Harry,” she said. “As long as it doesn’t take any time or energy.”

Harry grinned.

“Not much, no.”

He kissed her, and the kiss went on for longer than he had meant it to, as he wove his fingers into her
hair.

Then she slapped him.

This did not make him stop grinning.

“You shouldn’t kiss girls when you don’t mean it,” she told him severely.

This was true, Harry knew.

“Sorry, Ginny,” he said, and attempted to look sheepish. The grin probably didn’t help.

“What’s this about, then?” she said, hands on hips.

“It seemed like we could use some luck, was all,” he said with a shrug. “Is that okay?”

“…yeah, Harry. That’s okay.”

And it *was* okay, somehow. Harry even had a chance to pat Neville on the shoulder before his *tempus* charm told him it was time to leave.

Harry found his mind turning back, incongruously, to a moment from last fall when he’d watched a little girl in a purple dress ride a puppy around a park, waving a stick like a sword. He’d never learned her name. What waited for little girls in purple dresses if Voldemort ruled? Fear, at best. Torture and death at worst.

Harry didn’t honestly think his family and friends would want him to sacrifice himself for them. A complete stranger, though, that would be different. He could sacrifice his life for the peace of a little girl whose parents would never be murdered in front of her. For a lot of little girls. Wasn’t he a unicorn, after all?

Maybe he wasn’t completing the whole prophecy this way, but at least without his horcruxes Voldemort was vulnerable. It meant there was a chance.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the little snitch, his gift from Dumbledore. He kissed it, for luck.

“I’m about to die,” he told it, because he couldn’t tell his friends. They wouldn’t understand. They wouldn’t have this wild, burning hope that maybe, like his mother, his death could mean something, if he held it close to his heart. It would be nice to be like his mother.

The snitch clicked open, and a ring with a black stone fell out into his hands.
Harry talked to his mum and dad, and it was wonderful and it was heartbreaking.

Then, because Sirius was unsubtly guarding the front gate, he put on his invisibility cloak and gently hovered his way down from a second-story window at the back of the tower. He landed on one knee is light, powdery, fresh-fallen snow, and was absently pleased that the white broke up the black-on-black color scheme of the island.

There was no path down this way, but the snow made the aggressive vines sluggish. Harry kept his cloak on and picked his way through them, down to the uneven shore. The sea was laced with white-caps, and the jagged rocks of the coast were hidden by the coating of white. He had to slow down, to avoid breaking an ankle, so it was from a distance he saw two dark-robed figure alight on the beach, flying without broomsticks. Two?

Well, Harry hadn’t exactly come into this meeting forthrightly and above-board, either. He shrugged off his invisibility cloak and stuffed it into a pocket.

“Harry Potter,” Voldemort said, and his voice was different aloud than in Harry’s head. It had been a long time since Harry had seen him in person, snake-faced and aloof, voice high, cold, amused, eyes red.

Harry glanced briefly at the man next to Voldemort, and then away. He needed to stay calm, or his occlumency shields stood a good chance of flagging, with Voldemort so close. And that had a horrible chance of not being fatal.

“Hullo,” said Harry, made awkward by the reality of the situation sinking in.

A killing curse failed to strike him. Harry felt even more awkward.

“You can kill me,” Harry said, twisting his unfamiliar wand between his fingers. “Just let them live.”

Voldemort laughed, high and cold.

“Trying your mother’s trick, Harry?”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “I guess I am.”

“I see you have brought young Mr. Malfoy.”

Harry glanced behind him, but didn’t see so much as a flicker of Draco’s white tail against the snow. Legimens were a pain. Friends were a pain. But at least he could talk to this friend obliquely and he would get the hint….

“All the rest of my friends would try to stop me,” Harry said with perfect truth. “Draco cares about Draco. Anyway, I’m not the only one who failed to come alone. Hello, Professor.”

Snape glowered at him, hook-nosed, hair looking particularly awful, standing firm at his master’s side. He was carrying Nagini in his arms, the snake limp and dead-looking.

“Potter. This is foolish, even for you.”

“Why is he here?” Harry asked Voldemort, ignoring that comment. As if Harry didn’t already know that.
“I made Severus a promise, some years ago. In exchange for his service, I promised him that your death would be quick and painless. He has been faithful to me ever since, and so I am here to let him witness. Is not Lord Voldemort merciful?”

Harry blinked, trying to slot that into his mental map of the situation. A quick, painless death? That was… more than he’d been expecting, honestly.

“Thank you, my lord,” Snape said.

*Snape looked at Voldemort, and Snape's face was like a death mask. It was marble white and so still that when he spoke, it was a shock to see that anyone lived behind the blank eyes.*

“However, for your arrogance and for the harm you have done my cause, some repayment is in order. I promised Severus that I would make your death quick and clean,” Voldemort said, gesturing at his silent servant. “But I never made any promises about his own. Kill.”

The last word had been in parseltongue, Harry realized too late.

The snake moved before Harry could, jaws latching onto Professor Snape’s throat and sinking in.

*There was a terrible scream. Harry saw Snape's face losing the little color it had left; it whitened as his black eyes widened, as the snake's fangs pierced his neck, as his knees gave way and he fell.*

*He did not know why he was doing it, why he was approaching the dying man: he did not know what he felt as he saw Snape's white face, and the fingers trying to staunch the bloody wound at his neck.*

“He should last long enough to see your death,” Voldemort said familiarly, seeming content to ignore the spectacle that Harry couldn’t look away from, “Try to help him and I will consider it an end to our bargain, Harry.”

Without thought, Harry drew his unfamiliar wand and leveled it at the man, and hesitated. Revenge wasn’t part of the plan.

“Drop your wand. Unless you want the rest of your little friends to have their last moments beneath the cloak of a dementor.”

Harry dropped his wand, the hated blackthorn thing, and held on, frantically, to his occlumency barriers. He needed – he needed-

“Draco,” he said suddenly. “Help him.”

And Draco was there, flickering into human form by Snape’s side, pressing frantic hands to the red, ignoring the blood on his hands and the blood on the white snow.

“I had planned to make a spectacle of this,” Voldemort said familiarly, seeming content to ignore the spectacle that Harry couldn’t look away from, “But I find I like this better. It’s more personal this way.”

“Now, Harry,” Voldemort continued, as Harry struggled to remain still and silent as a mouse before a snake, mind empty, mind empty. “Remember, the key to being a ghost is to want to remain. Try to concentrate on that. As they used to say in my youth, death washes away all sins. *Avada kedavra.*”

There was a flash of green light reflected in Snape’s dark, fathomless eyes.
Crossroads and Confrontations

Harry turned slowly on the spot, and his surroundings seemed to invent themselves before his eyes. A wide-open space, bright and clean, a hall larger by far than the Great Hall, with that clear domed glass ceiling. It was quite empty. He was the only person there, except for - He recoiled. He had spotted the thing that was making the noises. It had the form of a small, naked child, curled on the ground, its skin raw and rough, flayed-looking, and it lay shuddering under a seat where it had been left, unwanted, stuffed out of sight, struggling for breath.

He was afraid of it. Small and fragile and wounded though it was, he did not want to approach it. Nevertheless he drew slowly nearer, ready to jump back at any moment. Soon he stood near enough to touch it, yet he could not bring himself to do it. He felt like a coward. He ought to comfort it, but it repulsed him.

"You cannot help."

He spun around. Albus Dumbledore was walking toward him, sprightly and upright, wearing sweeping robes of midnight blue.

"Harry." He spread his arms wide, and his hands were both whole and white and undamaged. "You wonderful boy. You brave, brave man. Let us walk."

And Dumbledore explained, and Harry had been both right and terribly, beautifully wrong. Dumbledore made a great deal more sense now, and it was a day for saying things that needed to be said, and saying goodbyes.

Harry imagined a bag of lemon drops, and passed them to his old headmaster, and they shared a smile.

Because he had been right that he needed to die, but wrong that it had to be the end. For oh, there were so many things he hadn’t done yet. Potions he hadn’t made. People he hadn’t saved. Questions he hadn’t answered.

Harry could always talk to his parents again later, in due time. For now, the world of the living beckoned.

He quite liked the surprise in store for Voldemort regarding the Elder Wand, as well.

#

Harry woke up. The train station had been no temperature at all, which made the shock of cold even stronger. He was lying on the beach of Azkaban. Voldemort was talking.

"-a fine statue, but my patience is at an end. Lower your wand, Draco."

“So you can kill me?” Draco gasped. He sounded like he was in pain.

There was a cry, and a thump. Harry turned his head towards the noise and opened his eyes. It took a great deal of effort. Draco was – over there, as if he’d tried to run. Kneeling at Voldemort’s feet, clutching his arm where Harry knew the Dark Mark lay. Nagini – where was Nagini? A dark lump in the snow, there. And his temporary wand – he dug frantically through the snow - here by his side. He clutched it.
Could Harry move? He could. The snow had grown thicker. He could barely see Voldemort and Draco. Did he have time? Could he manage this last essential thing, while Voldemort was distracted? He inched, ever so slowly, along on his belly, just another white lump. The rocks cut his hands as he pulled and pushed himself along, scraping his robes to tatters as he belly-crawled.

Nagini was not moving, forgotten in the snow. A discarded toy but not, yet, quite dead.

That wouldn’t do.

Harry pointed his wand at the cut stretching along the side of the giant snake’s neck and whispered, “Sectumsempra.”

For enemies.

The great head, finally severed from its body, moved no longer. Even more dark blood coated the snow. Harry struggled to his knees, body unfamiliar and coltish. Draco and Voldemort were still talking, though he’d lost the thread of conversation.

“There is forgiveness, even for this,” Voldemort said, and Harry could barely hear him over the sound of the wind, and they were only two dark shadows in the whiteout. “The time for foolishness is over. You can still be useful to Lord Voldemort, young Malfoy. I have basked in the reflected light of Potter’s regard for you. I do not wish to kill you, even now.”

“I- I-”

Before Draco could do something absurdly Gryffindor or depressingly Slytherin, Harry found his voice.

“You should… finish killing me. First.”

It would, at least, give Draco a chance to run. And if Dumbledore was right… if he was right….

Harry didn’t look behind him, to where he could imagine Snape’s crumbled corpse, drenched in blood. He couldn’t think about that now. He’d been so calm, before, and now that calm was crumbling into shards and ashes, back in a body that bled and cried and hurt.

Harry pushed himself to his feet, and squared his shoulders, and met Voldemort’s furious red gaze as the man strode towards him. He found it in his heart to smile.

“Harry,” Voldemort said sweetly, “Precisely how many lives do you have? I admit, I don’t mind killing you, but even I am liable to get bored eventually."

“Not sure. How about a proper duel this time? Just once more?” he asked. “For luck?”

“Once you explain how you are doing this.”

Harry smiled, and he explained, and Voldemort did not believe him.

“Your conscience cricket suggests this is a good time to repent,” Harry said, echoing Voldemort’s own gentle mockery back at him. Voldemort answered with a shriek, raising his wand.

“Avada kedavra!”

“Expelliarmus!”

The bang was like a cannon blast, and the golden flames that erupted between them, at the dead
center of the circle they had been treading, marked the point where the spells collided. Harry saw Voldemort's green jet meet his own spell, saw the Elder Wand fly high, spinning through the air toward the master it would not kill, who had come to take full possession of it at last. And Harry, with the unerring skill of the Seeker, caught the wand in his free hand as Voldemort fell backward, arms splayed, the slit pupils of the scarlet eyes rolling upward. Tom Riddle hit the floor with a mundane finality, his body feeble and shrunken, the white hands empty, the snakelike face vacant and unknowing. Voldemort was dead, killed by his own rebounding curse, and Harry stood with two wands in his hand, staring down at his enemy's shell.

One shivering second of silence, the shock of the moment suspended.

The only sound on the beach was the crash of waves, the gentle silence of falling snow, and their harsh breathing. Harry turned, then, and started towards where he knew his teacher had been. There was still a dark shape there, kneeling.

“Don’t look,” Draco said suddenly, into the quiet.

Harry had never shied away from painful things in his life. He drew closer, and saw a kneeling grey statue of his professor, his mentor, his teacher, clutching at a trail of shiny red stone that coated his neck and the side of his robes. His eyes were blank white marble, and the harsh lines of his face were carved in shadows of grief and despair.

Harry thought about Draco’s last attempt to turn a stone mouse back into a living mouse, and the red spatter that had resulted.

“You can reverse it, right, Draco? Draco?”

Harry’s heart beat in time with the waves crashing against the shore, but silence was the only response.
Harry was repairing his holly wand when he felt a chill in the air, and heard a woman scream. He smiled, feeling both vindictive and hopeful in equal measure, and thought about fighting tentacled things back to back with Ron.

"Expecto patronem," he called, and his stag answered the movement of the Elder Wand. And as he looked into the silver eyes, Harry knew that this stag would not fade until its job was done, and that it would be able to do more to Dementors than simply harry them.

"Go," Harry said softly, "And make this island safe."

The stag bent his neck in acknowledgement, turned towards the Dementors approaching, lowered its magnificent antlers, and charged.

Well, Harry thought with some satisfaction, that was relaxing. He tucked away his two spare wands – must do something with those later – and looked for a moment at his holly wand. It was like greeting an old friend, sorely missed.

Or perhaps sort of dying made one philosophical.

Draco, Harry thought suddenly, was being rather quiet.

He looked at Draco. Draco was staring at Professor Snape’s statue, something dark twisting his expression.

“So,” Harry said. “This was quite the idea you had.”

“I saw you hit by a killing curse and collapse to the ground in a faint,” Draco said flatly, not looking at Harry. “I know what you fainting looks like. I had to distract him somehow.”

“Well… it worked. Good job.”

“Good job, he says. As if he didn’t get hit by the killing curse twice. You know, Harry, you would still be the best Dark Lord ever if you just showed a little dignity.”

“Never. Anyway, he only hit me with it once.”

“Only. Once. You know it’s speciality is being unable to be blocked? You can’t just deflect the killing curse.”

“It’s complicated,” Harry said, beginning to be defensive and suddenly remembering something of the circumstances of the day. “Er. Maybe we could just not mention that part to anyone? Ever? I feel like they might… overreact.”

“Overreact to you being immune from death?”

“I’m not very immune from death,” Harry tried, pleased to be arguing with Draco again, even as he wondered absently if they were going to freeze to death arguing out here in the snow. “It was really only Voldemort. There was a prophecy and – and things.”

“…I can’t even argue with you saying the Dark Lord’s name anymore.”

“Sure you can. Argument’s good for the soul.”
“I am never, ever coming on an adventure with you ever again,” Draco said with deep, bitter sincerity.

“But we’re having so much fun,” Harry chirped, just to be contrary.

Draco deliberately bent down, scooped up a handful of snow, balled it up, and threw it with perfect accuracy at Harry’s head. That was how Sirius, Ron, and Hermione found them. Having a rather manic snowball fight by a dead man and an ambiguously alive statue.

“Harry,” said Sirius, looking strangely dry and not covered in blood. Draco had blood in his hair and on his hands, and Harry was simply caked in snow. “You’re late.”

Harry paused in rubbing snow into Draco’s hair – he was helping him clean it, really he was – and eyed Sirius.

“I had an appointment,” Harry said finally.

“I can’t even swear at you,” Sirius said. “Kid- what happened?”

Harry did not want to answer that question. He sat back in the snow, and gestured for Draco to narrate.

“Harry killed the Dark Lord,” Draco summarized. “And took his powers and used them to create an extremely large silver stag. I was never here, saw nothing, and if anyone asks I don’t know any of you.”

“Thanks,” Harry said dryly.

“You are welcome to the enemies that will come out of the woodwork because of all this – this,” Draco said, with an emphatic hand waving at the snow and the sea and the body. Oh, right, the body.

“Thanks,” Harry repeated, and started to shiver.

There was more talking, and then he was bundled up in a cloak and Sirius was carrying him somewhere. That was nice.

There was something he’d been meaning to say to Sirius. What was it?

“Sorry about dying a little,” Harry assured him. “It really wasn’t that bad. And dad says hello and good job, and mum says hello and stop introducing me to the weird bands, your taste in music is still atrocious.”


“Because we love you and want to keep you safe. Stupid.”

“…get some sleep, kid. Before I give in to the urge to knock you unconscious.”

Harry thought that sounded pretty darn good right about then. He was very cold, and having a hard time not thinking about Professor Snape being stone. That was upsetting. Really… pretty upsetting….

Harry slept.

#
“He deserves a grave,” Draco was saying, low and quiet. “He was a great man.”

“He was a psychotic mass-murderer who wanted us all dead or mind-raped into submission,” said Sirius. “He deserves to be eaten by sharks, and I intend to give it to him.”

“He was a great man, once,” Draco said. “My father told me. A long time ago, before things went—wrong.”

“If you think Tom Riddle was ever right, you’re as bad as your father.”

“Hn,” Harry said, because there was a rule about talking about Draco’s father. They didn’t do that. “Harry?” Draco asked.

“I want him… buried.” Harry said. “Here will do. But put Tom Riddle as the name. He’d hate that.”

He opened his eyes. He was lying in a bed, and though the room was the black stone of Azkaban, the horrifically heavy atmosphere that deadened the place had lifted. It was just a room, and he was lying on a rather comfortable cloth pallet. Neat. The light was pale, and the window was covered in a white cloth. It was warm. He cuddled against his pillow, which was the best pillow he’d touched since almost dying again.

“I shouldn’t,” Sirius said, reaching out to brush Harry’s hair out his eyes. He was sitting cross-legged next to Harry’s pallet, watching him with dark eyes. “You are in so much trouble there are no more words for it, Harry.”

“…but he’s not going to kill any more kids,” Harry pointed out. “I really hated him doing that.”

“I didn’t much like him killing adults, either,” Sirius said with tired good humor. “You did so good, but you are still in so much trouble. Life’s unfair that way.”

Life was, indeed, unfair.

“Do I need to get up and fight more things? Have Ron tell you about the thing in the basement with the tentacles.”

“I heard.” Sirius tucked the blanket up to Harry’s chin. “You can stay in bed if you want.”

Harry did want. He wanted to stay in bed and watch the snow through the window curtain and not really think about anything, and that’s exactly what he did.

After a few minutes Draco said, “Can I get you anything?”

“About… twenty-four hours with no one yelling at me for trying to kill myself,” Harry said, having thought about this. “After that they can take turns, but I’m feeling a little…. How was he feeling.”

“ Weird.”

“ Weird. You’re feeling weird.”

“Mhmm.”

“Okay. I’ll get Greg to guard you. Greg doesn’t even have the vocabulary to yell at you if he wanted to.”

Harry hummed agreeably, watched the snow fall, and heard Draco leave the room.
Chapter Notes

A little bit about future plans because folks are asking: that was definitely the climax of the fic and we are on the downhill now, but it’s Harry and the problem of potions, not Harry and the problem of Voldemort again, why him again, so there’s more to do for a while. At least in part since it feels like ten chapters since I was able to tell a joke. This chapter addresses what comes next for Harry and what about Snape, the two main questions in the comments last time.

I also have a couple novellas planned afterwards called Harry Potter and the Language of Serpents and Harry Potter and the Various Possible Romances (title subject to change, that one is a little silly).

And because some of you like giving me terrible ideas, a series of drabbles exploring stuff like Voldemort wins AU’s of this fic.

If a dictator falls in a forest, does he make a sound?

The first odd thing, Harry found in the following days, was that killing Voldemort did not end the war. The Ministry was still full of Death Eaters and mind controlled puppets. The Death Eaters still had their army of giants and their werewolf and vampire allies, even if the remaining Dementors had decided that they were best suited for a quiet, rural lifestyle on, say, a mysterious island, not cluttering up towns and byways.

The second odd thing was that no one seemed to expect him to fight anything. Oh, he tried, but with the Dementors cowed to his will Azkaban just wasn’t that bad anymore. The only reason they stayed was because they needed to thoroughly brick up the floo entrance and secure it for a base for Hermione’s new Muggleborn army, of which Harry was an honorary member. Not that it was a permanent base, but until they had someplace to go, they were staying put.

Draco had come up with a new political slogan for his inevitable run for Minister against Hermione. Muggleborns: They’re Terrifying.

Harry had to admit, it was both catchy and accurate.

When Hermione and Ron weren’t in the process of training a paramilitary force of grateful, slightly mad, and increasingly dangerous wizards and witches, they camped out by Harry’s bedside for the first couple days. This involved some tears, and some yelling. Harry could have left his bed, but it would have involved dealing with people and questions, neither of which he felt he had the patience for. He had a great deal of work to do, after all. He had a feeling his potion to assist with people afflicted with dark curses was going to be very necessary, sooner than later, and so he’d gone back to basics – a basic runic syllabary and 1,001 Herbs and Fungi. Both were soothing, familiar companions.

Harry’s friends all visited him, as well as nearly everyone else on the island, the stubborn remainder of the prisoners they’d rescued. Greg allowed only his friends past the door, taking to his new job of professional loomer as if made for it.
On Harry’s third morning since Voldemort’s death, the solid sleeping presence of Sirius shook himself thoroughly with the dawn, and changed into a man. A frowning man.

Er.

“Nice morning,” Harry tried. “Weather’s quieted down.”

“And we’re leaving today,” Sirius informed him. “So up you get.”

“But – no. I have to–”

“You have to what, Harry?”

“The statue,” Harry muttered.

“Yes, Draco said you were avoiding that. Well, I’ve dealt with old Snape.”

Harry shot bolt upright.

“By stealing a boat, Harry, calm down. Calm down. He’s fine, I mean, as fine as a man who is a statue can be. Draco did a good, thorough transformation. He’ll need help untransfiguring him and some damn practice, I heard about the mice, but we can take care of that. Say something, Harry.”

Harry shook himself.

“Right,” Harry said. “A boat?”

“Stole it off some muggles,” Sirius said sheepishly. “Er. Commandeered. I’ve got papers that say I’m allowed to take stuff if I need it, but it always makes me feel shifty. And it might be a ship, I’m not nautical.”

“…Sirius, what have you been doing the past few years?”

Sirius completely ignored the question.

“Couldn’t you untransfigure him? I mean, I know you don’t like him, but.”

Sirius sighed.

“I would if I could, Harry, if only to see his face afterwards, but I won’t risk it going wrong. No. You want Professor McGonagall, which is convenient what with you going back to Hogwarts when term starts.”

“I’m – what? No.”

“Security there isn’t as tight as it was when you were hiding in there,” Sirius continued. “Just a few Death Eaters to clear out, and then we’d have one of our strongholds back. It’s going to be a pain in the neck clearing the Ministry, but if we take Hogwarts that’s a start.”

“Take it – but – what are you going to do with the Carrows and the others?”

“No idea,” Sirius said cheerfully. “I’m sure I’ll come up with something in the heat of the moment. After all, I’d hate to go into something absurdly dangerous with a plan.”

That, Harry thought, was a bit too on the nose, and he glared at Sirius.
“Some people would be nice to me right now,” he told Sirius. “Because of, I don’t know, trauma. I might cry.”

“Yeah, Rita Skeeter will love that. She’ll write another book, Harry Potter Defeated the Dark Lord and Then Cried About It.”

“...how long am I going to be in trouble?”

“Forever. Or at least until you agree to stay safe at Hogwarts while the Order wraps up the rest of the war.”

“Hogwarts isn’t safe yet.”

“We can deal with a few Death Eaters. Especially now that they’re scared and leaderless, and we won’t have to hide quite so hard.”

“I can help,” Harry said to his blanket. “I really can, I won’t fight him and then lose to someone else.”

“Then you can be support and backup. If something goes really wrong, we’ll call you in, but we won’t waste you on raids.”

“You have been rehearsing this in your head.”

“I absolutely have. For days.”

“Why did I think having a parent would be nice,” Harry moaned.

There was a pause.

“Dunno. But I’ve made it something of a lifestyle keeping Potters in more or less one piece and without too swelled a head, so I reckon I’m not stopping now.”

Harry flapped a hand at him.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. I’m just doomed.”

“You’ve been spending too much time with Draco Malfoy.”

This was, admittedly, true.

Harry rolled out of bed, and got up.

# 

A great deal of arguments later, involving quite a lot more yelling and more than one day, it happened like this. They all sorted themselves out on a great boat, leaving the floo once more un-blocked and the Dementors under strict orders to answer no questions on pain of Harry coming back. The Muggleborn Army and Harry’s friends took a boat officially commandeered by a shady branch of the Muggle government back to the mainland, where they were going to filter back into society in preparation for the end of Hogwarts Winter Break.

Harry leaned on a railing and felt the cold salt spray on his face, and spotted Hermione striding by.

“Hey, Hermione. Got a minute?”
“You just have to ask,” she said, and came and leaned on the railing next to him. “How are you, Harry?”

“I had an idea for how you could cheer me up. A prank I want to pull, at Hogwarts. I think it’d be alright for the war effort, too, and I bet you aren’t that thrilled about being packed up and left out, either.”

“Well? What is it?”

“We have all this spare Polyjuice now, which gave me the idea. Hermione… how do you feel about teaching Muggle Studies?”
“Hullo, mum,” Ron said, coming down the stairs from his ‘sickroom.’ “I, ah. Found Ginny upstairs.”

Ginny, on the stairs behind him, nudged him with an elbow.

“Say something only you would know, Ron,” she hissed.

“I’m getting there!” Ron objected loudly.

His mother burst into tears.

#

“Mother, father,” Draco said, stepping into the parlor of Grimmauld Place and folding his hands together to keep them from shaking. His parents looked perfect, sitting by the fire. He had never felt less perfect in his life. “I’m – I hope you have been well?”

“Very well, Draco, dear,” his mother said with polite warmth. “Sit down, won’t you?”

He sat, endlessly grateful that none of the Army or the Order were here to witness this.

“The Dark Lord has perished quite finally,” Draco said, looking at the fire. “I can personally attest to it as a witness.”

His mother gasped, a horrible tiny sound.

“I hope you are happy,” his father said.

“I think I am beginning to understand your advice about pragmatism, father,” Draco said, still looking at the fire. “We must think about the family, after all.”

There was silence for a little while.

“Are you well, Draco?” asked his mother.

It surprised Draco more than it surprised his parents when he broke down telling the story.

#

Harry Potter and Hermione Granger did not go home for the last few days of Christmas break. Under cover of invisibility and Polyjuice, they flew into Hogwarts on the back of Witherwings.

It was embarrassing easy to poison the Carrows, with easy access to Dobby and the Hogwarts kitchens. Harry felt almost bad, but why come up with a slow-acting poison that causes sleep and horrific nightmares for use on terrible teachers if not, indeed, to use it on terrible teachers?

A storage chest, bought and hastily reconfigured for the purpose, became two prison cells. Harry’s sense of irony liked it, and Hermione and Sirius did not object.

Harry could have told Ron, who would have objected on the grounds of it being creepy, but he didn’t. Ron was going home for a little while, and wasn’t that for the best? Harry and Hermione were the ones who couldn’t show their faces at Hogwarts without starting a miniature war.
Sirius had also bought Harry an ankle holster for a spare wand. It seemed rude, somehow, to carry the Elder Wand around strapped to his ankle, but he also didn’t have a better idea. The war wasn’t over, and he certainly wasn’t going to lose the thing after all the trouble he’d had with it.

Prim, proper, and predatory, Alecto Carrow met with the Death Eaters stationed in Hogsmeade and told them that they had been reassigned to the Ministry and that others would be coming to take their place here. Her gaze was firm, her manner authoritarian, as if she was entirely used to commanding troops in battle.

With a dark, hooded glare and a bitter smirk, Amycus Carrow informed the Hogwarts staff that they would be having a staff meeting in preparation for the new semester. The staff, with stiff formality, acceded to this.

The timing was very precise. Fifty minutes gone, ten minutes to go.

The woman who looked very like Alecto looked at the man whose looks were those of Amycus.

“We don’t have to do this,” she said softly, gentleness strange with her face and voice.

“Sure we do,” he said, and his voice turned the humor dark. “When else are we going to get a chance to teach these classes the way they should be taught?”

“I just… I’m pretty sure it’s wrong somehow.”

“They’re going to enjoy being locked in a trunk more than they’ll enjoy Azkaban,” he said, dropping his voice. “And I don’t know where else we’ll send prisoners, even with reforms at the Ministry.”

She sighed.

“Focus on who you’re going to be,” he ordered, and set his expression in his best Death Eater snarl. He was the best. He was a sadist. He was – well, a complete git.

Onwards. To the staff meeting.

“Will the headmaster be joining us?” Professor McGonagall asked Harry from the other side of the staff table, and Harry tried to avoid the urge to jump or beg her not to take house points.

“He’s gone,” Harry said, and reconsidered this immediately. Professor Snape wasn’t gone. “That is, he’s not well.”

“What’s wrong with him?”

Harry fought the urge to draw his wand at the light in her eye. Urk.

“That is not relevant,” said his sort-of-sister. “However, in his absence we will be running Hogwarts… as we see fit.”

This provoked a very pointed silence.
“I shall be taking my classes on field trips to the muggle cinema, to emphasize how disgusting it is,” she continued.

“That sounds very educational,” Slughorn said, attempting to sound jolly.

“My class will be learning the importance of clearing one’s mind and being at peace with oneself,” Harry said very solemnly.

Another short, more confused silence.

“I sense death very close to you,” Professor Trelawney said, and sniffed.

“I’ve always thought you were a very under-esteemed soothsayer,” Harry told her absently. “We really must give you a raise.”

“We can give her a raise,” said the woman who looked like Alecto. “We could give them all raises.”

“Right,” he said firmly. “Raises for everyone. Next order of business?”

Professor Sprout said, cautiously, “Are you… feeling quite alright?”

Harry attempted to look forlorn. It didn’t really fit his current face.

“I have very mixed feelings about Lord Snakeface being dead.”

Hermione broke into helpless giggles, covering her face in her hands.

“Hah!” Harry declared. “I win, I win, I kept a straight face longest.”

“You cheater, Harry Potter,” she said, still choking on laughter. “Lord Snakeface indeed. You are awful and should be ashamed of yourself.”

“Harry. Harry Potter?” asked Professor McGonagall, drawing their attention away from each other.

“It’s all lies,” he assured her. “I’m Amycus Carrow. I like kicking puppies and scowling at people. Harry Potter’s just a lie made up by our enemies to annoy us. He doesn’t even really exist.”

 “…your father once told me that James Potter was an elaborate fiction based on Polyjuice and thus couldn’t be given detention.”

Harry looked down, and smiled.

Professor Slughorn had risen from the table, and Harry let Hermione point her wand at him.

“Sit down, please, Professor. Harry and I have things to talk to you all about, and I’d still like to discuss whether it will be possible for us to take our NEWTs on time.”

“We could take them next year,” Harry mutters. “There’s time.”

“Don’t be silly,” said Hermione.

“So, where is our third prankster, Mr. Potter?” asked Professor McGonagall, expression far more human. “Where is Mr. Weasley?”

“Ron? He’s been home with spattergroit this whole time.”

“The – the Dark Lord is really dead?” asked Slughorn, back in his chair.
“Tom Riddle is dead,” Harry agreed. “Though the time isn’t right to confirm that publically.”

His hair was curling into its usual mess, just as Hermione’s hair was losing its redness as they both reverted to their regular appearances.

“So, can we stay and teach?” Hermione asked. “I promise to keep up with my coursework as well, and we’ve all been using the syllabi to try to keep up – Harry’s had some trouble with the protean charm but I’m sure he’ll do fine now he has a little less on his mind.”

“Ravenclaw missed out on a great deal when you were chosen for Gryffindor,” said Professor Flitwick. “I would be happy to help our new Defense teacher master his charms in time for his NEWTs, though of course we will have to schedule it around the class schedule.”

The Hogwarts class schedule resembled nothing so much as its tangle of magical staircases, with no logical pattern even Hermione had been able to determine, but if Professor Flitwick said it was possible, Harry would believe him.

“Fantastic. Professor Slughorn,” and Harry turned to the nervously sweating man, “I’ve got this question about blood replenishment potion—“
In celebration of their return to Hogwarts, Harry locked himself in a potion’s lab for a day and a night and made packets of cheering lemon drops for the whole school. He hadn’t really wanted to think about candy these past six months, because candy was something he’d shared with Dumbledore, but now it seemed like the only possible right thing to do.

Hermione, as should have been entirely predictable, had a series of hysterical meltdowns about her class syllabi and she just wasn’t ready to be a teacher and what if she was terrible at it!

The point that she really couldn’t possibly be worse did not seem to sway her. Not that she would have been Hermione if she’d been so swayed.

Professor Slughorn didn’t gather his courage and do anything particularly heroic one way or another, so Harry felt free to continue pestering him about the details of potion combinations – blood replenishment, antivenom, general healing, and aftereffects of dark curses, just to take a random example.

A man wearing a large floppy hat and a false beard and sunglasses turned up to deliver a new statue to the Defense teacher, which Harry had placed in an unused staff office and then had to go sit quietly until the urge to scream went away.

At least Sirius looked really ridiculous with a Dumbledore beard.

Ironically, the first thing Harry said in his Defense classes was, “Wands away.”

He was obeyed without question as he quizzed the classes on the syllabus, choosing names from the roster at random as a way to learn their names. Right until Monday’s third class, when someone dropped a haircare potion in his classroom and he was abruptly… glossy.

He summoned a small hand mirror, examined his new hair, and said evenly, “Thank you to whichever student that was. I’ve been meaning to try something new.”

The baby Hufflepuffs exchanged uneasy looks with each other, but Harry went on with the lesson as if nothing had happened, leaving the haircare potion to beautify his class until someone caught it again. He returned to seeing if Amycus Carrow had gotten anything about minor dark creatures to stick in the third year’s heads.

(Hint: he had not.)

“It’s hopeless,” he told Hermione that afternoon over tea, watching her undo a multitude of red braids that had ended up making her hair almost as crinkly as her natural look. “They’re all dead scared of me and could hex their classmates blind, but there’s nothing in there about anything that you can’t solve with hexing or cursing. As if he managed to entirely skip the very important lesson that sometimes the best defense is running away.”

“I decided to review the Muggle government and legal system,” Hermione said. “I certainly have enough to criticize about our courts.”

Harry decided not to ask, on the theory that he knew nothing about Muggle courts and didn’t want to have to care.
“DA meeting tonight?” he asked instead.

“Oh, yes.” She took another lemon tart.

“…missing Ron?” Harry hazarded, since Hermione was not usually a lemon tart person.

“I don’t find it all as funny as you do,” she said quietly. “How long before we can stop this? I hate talking this way about regular people.”

Oh, hell.

“So stop. Stop talking about politics altogether, talk about science and the moon and… whatever you want to talk about, Hermione. If kids complain, they complain. We can handle it.”

“Most of them won’t, except maybe a few of the Slytherins… but some of the ones who don’t complain will still talk about it to their families.”

“Technically we’re still searching all their mail. We could erase bits that talk about us.”

“That’s so unethical, Harry.”

“S’ppose. I’ve had terrible role models.”

Hermione could have argued with this, and didn’t. Harry eyed her over his teacup.

“Harry,” she looked up and met his eyes squarely. “What you said at the staff meeting. I’ve noticed you tend to make little jokes about things that are really bothering you. How much is his death bothering you, really?”

Sometimes Harry hated that Hermione was really clever. He took a strengthening swallow of tea, and then poured himself another cup to buy time.

“Ginny told me once that the worst thing about him was that he wasn’t all bad.”

The steam rising from his teacup really did make interesting patterns.

“He might not have been all bad, but he was pretty close, wasn’t he?”

“…yeah. But – even if he was cold, and evil, and thought about murder the way you think about… about….”

“Whether to vanish a potion that hadn’t come out quite right?” Hermione offered.

“Exactly. He was also… he wasn’t nice or honorable, not really, but he knew how to play it on the telly? And he could be so clever, Hermione, you have no idea. He’d talk to Professor Snape sometimes about books and potions and all that and I couldn’t understand a word of it but I knew it was… a memory I could go back to for years and years and still learn something from. And when he was in a good mood, he did like teaching.” Harry smiled crookedly. “I think it made him feel clever and superior.”

Hermione watched him levelly, and he looked away from the sympathy in her eyes.

“Anyway. He wasn’t complicated, not really, but I feel complicated about him?”

“I always thought he was trying to get you to come over to his side.”
“Sort of. He wanted me to surrender, of course, that’s part of why he didn’t see what I was doing – but he wouldn’t have actually been happy if I’d surrendered or if the war was over and he’d just been head of Magical Britain. He would have gone looking for his next fight. There was someplace empty inside him, even before he started splitting his soul up.”

“I worried, when I found out he had been top of his year. That it was a bad thing to be, a bad sign.”

“You’re going to be a great witch, but not an evil witch.”

“Thanks, Harry.”

“Right. Enough moping. Surely we have more work to do?”

They did, indeed, have more work to do.
Meetings and Lemon Drops

Time flies when you’re trying to keep up with Hogwarts seventh year curriculum, teach seven years of students, and research antidotes and dark spell reversal to rescue your mentor from being stone. Harry might have flagged, but his definition of a stressful situation had recently undergone an upgrade. If it was something to do besides look at his own face in the papers, still undesirable number one, he’d do it. Taking a page out of Professor Snape’s book, he ruthlessly assigned detention to anyone clever enough to grade homework and assigned them the homework from the next grade down, or set them to setting up obstacle courses for their fellows. Divide and conquer, that was the ticket.

At least he and Hermione had the DA, who had been informed of the situation on the first night and had since cooperated in getting detentions to help with homework and also some evocative screaming to imitate being tortured.

Harry took his own turn screaming. It was quite cathartic.

Hermione made him stop assigning Ron and Neville detention just so that they could scream together, which Harry thought was rotten of her.

Some weeks in, Hermione took a moment between classes to drop by and ask, “Polyjuice isn’t actually addictive, is it?”

Harry blinked at his red-headed sister, pulled his mind out of his persona for a minute, and said slowly, “I’ll check.”

He checked. It turned out most people weren’t so able with making potions or so paranoid about discovery as to have it come up much.

“I think we need to take the weekend and apparate somewhere we can use our own faces.”

Which he did not want to do, there was too much to do this weekend, but that was true every weekend. The Quidditch teams, technically banned but reconstituted as unofficial sports clubs that Harry pretended to be blind about, were practicing out the window. Life was awful.

Harry and Hermione managed one evening at Grimmauld Place, fencing with Mr. Malfoy about what happened with Voldemort and their plans for the future before they decided camping in a forest for the weekend sounded very nice.

Which turned into a dueling battle with Snatchers, because Harry’s life could never be simple, but dueling felt easy lately. The team of thugs were unconscious and trussed up, and Harry and Hermione exchanged glances.

“I guess we’re spending our weekend off at Azkaban?” Harry asked.

Hermione sighed.

“I’ve been meaning to check in with the army, I guess.”

A series of apparitions and a short ferry ride later, they passed the Death Eater thugs into waiting cells for processing.

Mary Cattermole saluted Hermione and reported, “Ma’am! May I introduce my husband Reg? He’s
quit working at the Ministry to help out cleaning here. There is a lot of cleaning to do!”

“At ease,” Hermione sighed.

“Honor to meet you, ma’am, Mr. Potter,” said Reg Cattermole. “Can’t thank you enough for all you’ve done. Who are these, then?”

“Snatchers,” said Hermione. “Please try to figure out if they’re volunteers or under the Imperius? Those will need separate wings until we sort out trials.”

“Of course, ma’am,” said Mary. “Anything else?”

“How have things been here?”

“Oh, fine. Quite funny, actually. The Ministry keeps sending us Muggleborn and we just turn around and recruit them. Apparently the army or Azkaban is a winning pitch.”

Harry was beginning to have a headache, but he had to agree that was quite funny.

“Carry on, then,” Hermione said.

Later, Harry said, “They, er, take you quite seriously.”

“I keep wanting to tell them I’m only a teenager, but… it seems to keep them focused?”

“Maybe I could get the Order to call me sir.”

Hermione surveyed him.

“Not with that hair.”

“Hey.”

Harry really was not sure why his hair was the running joke. Hermione shrugged, unrepentant.

“I wish I could figure out what I’m doing wrong with my darkness antidote,” he added. “It would solve figuring out who was under the Imperius if I could just lift it.”

“Harry, you’re trying to solve a problem that’s never been solved before without the assistance of a potion master. I’ve seen you with Professor Slughorn. He can’t be that helpful while running away.”

It was true that Professor Slughorn had taken to running away when he saw Harry, in as dignified a manner as a man of Professor Slughorn’s age and girth could run away, but Harry had thought that was just his face.

“I thought that was just my face.”

“No, Harry,” she sighed.

“I would have thought I’d see more Dementors about the place,” Harry said to change the subject.

“You would think,” Hermione said, and changed the subject to homework.

#

It turned out that fighting a war was long stretches of boredom interspersed with terror, but running a war was mostly meetings. DA meetings, staff meetings, Order meetings, Army meetings. Harry went
to them all, tried to be patient with a hundred questions he didn’t want to answer and thus didn’t, because looking mysterious and twinkly had always worked for Dumbledore, and doodled potions notes in the margins of his parchment. Recounting the minutes of the meetings would be an exercise in boredom, but a few things should be said.

Bellatrix Lestrange, as Voldemort’s remaining chief lieutenant, seemed to see it as her duty to hold things together in his absence. He was rumored to be on the continent, scouting for some super weapon. (They were a little out of date on that one, but not on the wrong track, Harry thought, then offered the sharer of this rumor a lemon drop.)

Harry preferred the Order’s suspicion about him to the Army’s near-worship, but both groups had the same basic problem: the enemy could use magic, too. And unless they wanted to copy Voldemort’s habit of raiding people’s houses while they slept, it was quite tricky to ambush wizards in ways where they didn’t just teleport away to try another day. A bit of cautious testing had demonstrated that the taboo had broken with Voldemort’s death, so they couldn’t even say the name in a large circle of angry muggleborn and summon Death Eaters until they ran out of Death Eaters.

Small favors included the giants, vampires, and werewolves knowing a bad bet when the leader of your allies disappeared mysteriously, and they seemed willing to fade back into the woodwork.

It was tempting to skip Order meetings to avoid Moody’s idea of an identity test and Mrs. Weasley’s idea of an attempt to persuade Harry to stay out of the war from now on, but Harry’s natural curiosity won out.

And then there was this exchange:

“So Sirius got us some hippogriffs—” Harry was beginning to explain, having decided that they’d keep asking about Azkaban if he didn’t give them something.


“Er. Yes. My godfather?”

“Huh. Thought he was dead.”

Harry glanced at Remus Lupin, who looked blank.

“Well… he’s not.”

“You sure it’s him?”

“He still has his animagus form.”

“Then he’s been AWOL from his Order duties.”

Harry considered this.

“I guess he was busy. Lemon drop?”
Harry let himself into Professor Snape’s office, closed the door behind him, and turned around. Light came from the lit fireplace.

Professor Snape was still a statue. Harry sat down in an armchair across from the kneeling, haggard form and eyed him.

“Would it be disrespectful to put a sheet over him?” he asked Draco.

The horror having worn off, the whole thing was mostly worrying and depressing in equal measure. Professor Snape’s office, fire lit, was a comforting and familiar place, its occupant aside. The creepy things in jars seemed to welcome Harry home. Draco was lying on the floor next to the statue for whatever reason.

“…absolutely, Harry. Put a sheet over him.”

“No need to be cross about it.”

“I am tired. You make me tired, and this project makes me tired. Why are you here?”

“To check on him. And you.”

“I can’t turn him back yet but Professor McGonagall seems confident I’ll be able to in time. Go away.”

Harry eyed Draco, who was still lying on the floor as if struck down by his life, blond hair spread across the dark flagstones in a soft, pale wave. It would have been an attractive picture if Draco wasn’t whining again.

“I would have thought she’d just take care of it,” Harry said after a bit, eyeing Draco.

“Apparently, mixing transfiguration with dark magic is the sort of thing only a student would come up with, because anyone with a solid understanding would know that dark magic creates permanency and the last thing you want with transfiguration is permanency.”

Harry was not sure he understood that, but he nodded anyway.

Draco continued, “So she’s set me to unraveling it as a punishment, with pointed comments that perhaps joining the Death Eaters and petrifying the staff expert on dark curse reversal was not very clever. Also she keeps patting me on the head and calling me a good boy. I hate my life.”

“Professor McGonagall. Pats you on the head. And calls you a good boy.”

Harry tried to visualize this, and failed.

“She’s been rather worried about Professor Snape,” Draco explained. “She says that at least this way she knows where he is and that he’s not getting into more trouble. Did you know she’s taking this semester as an opportunity to single-handedly steal the House Cup from Slytherin?”

Harry had, indeed, noticed the drastic reversal in fortunes in the giant hourglasses tracking the House Cup, but had decided that it was his duty as sort-of-headmaster to be biased towards his own house.

“I hadn’t noticed, no.”
“Liar. Just the way you haven’t noticed our amateur Quidditch tournament.”

“I’m your teacher, you know. I can assign you homework. Or detention.”

“Try it, Potter.”

Draco looked at him sharply suddenly.

“Here, now. What are you doing wearing your own face around the place? Not that it’s not an improvement, but it’s not safe.”

“You care. I’m touched.”

“It’s not safe for me,” Draco clarified in a hiss.

Harry hummed agreeably.

“Polyjuice may or may not be addictive, so on weekends I’m using my own face and my invisibility cloak.”

Draco sat up abruptly, shaking out his wand hand, and turned to the selection of rocks and beetles in a cage on the desk.

“Right. Back to work.”

“What? Why now?”

“I have a very clear impression of how Professor Snape will react if I let him stay stone long enough for you to develop potion addictions and other bad habits before he has a chance to deal with them. He will blame me, and I do not want him blaming me, Harry. I will not have it.”

Harry tried to figure out if he should rein in this spurt of inspiration, and decided to egg it on instead.

“I’ve also been picking fights with Snatchers and Alastor Moody,” he offered.

Draco growled, very much like an angry cat, and flicked his wand savagely at a stone teacup without words.

It turned into a teacup.

They both stared at the teacup, which seemed perfectly normal. Blue and white china, in a handsome pattern of little flowers.

“…I thought they exploded?” Harry asked.

“They do. They did. This one didn’t. Why.”

Harry grabbed Draco’s shoulder before he could sink dramatically back to the ground again.

“You cast it silently,” Harry offered. “You don’t usually do that.”

“…I have the verbal incantation for reversal wrong,” Draco breathed. “I must have, of course, I just have to figure out what the right incantation should be.”

Draco smiled brilliantly at him, pale grey eyes warm and alive, blond hair tousled, and then ran out of the room as if chased by hippogriffs. Harry watched him go, feeling… strange. Strange and
Despite this immediate progress, it still took until nearly Easter for all the necessary preparations to be made. Once Professor Snape was defrosted, so to speak, they would have only seconds to halt the flow of blood, administer antidotes and healing potions, and bolster him against shock. There would be aftereffects of dark magic, of snake poison, and probably some of the telltale problems of time travel. Madame Pomfrey, much engaged in the problem, helpfully lent Harry a number of books on how to orient time travelers.

Meanwhile, the war dragged on, except it seemed less and less like a war and more and more like an aggressive stalemate every day. The Death Eaters were in a holding pattern, the Ministry had finished its initial purge of Muggleborn and had no idea what else to do with itself, and the Muggleborn Army had finished securing their hiding places and were settled in. Harry and Hermione let the Order supervise, more and more overwhelmed by Hermione’s brilliant idea to catch up on NEWTs and Harry’s brilliant idea to teach classes at the same time.

Ron, also caught up in Hermione’s brilliant idea to catch up on NEWTs, broke what had been an uneasy sort of silence with Harry to confide, “I wouldn’t go along with it, but mum’s so happy with it I can’t argue.”

“You just want Hermione to go out with you.”

Harry marked another essay wrong, wrong, wrong. Professor Snape’s grading methods did come in handy sometimes.

“Well, sure, but not while she looks like that I don’t.”

Harry glanced up at Hermione. She looked quite normal, red hair, severe expression… oh.

“Oh, right.”

Ron patted him on the shoulder.

“Sometimes I really worry about you.”

“I’m doing better, Ron, really.”

Harry no longer felt so strange and distant from his fellow human beings. It hadn’t been a bad feeling, but he was glad it was wearing off.

“I can tell. But you’ll take me with you, next time, won’t you?”

Harry froze for just a moment, but what answer could he give?

“Of course, Ron. I promise.”

Ron nodded, satisfied with his place in the world, and went back to revising for Charms.
“Retrorsum petrificare lapisifors!”

The first thing Severus Snape saw was Madame Pomfrey looking disapproving. In his moment of shock, she pulled his hands away from the wound on his neck and slapped a soaking-wet bandage over it before Harry even had a chance to see the ruin that it had become. The yellow bandage stuck firm, as if with a life of its own.

Professor Snape looked around, saw Harry, raised a red hand and said in a bubbly voice, “You… idiot….”

Snape fell silent, slumping, and Harry realized with abrupt clarity why his friends had been so furious with him for saying goodbye. It was a feeling like cutting yourself on broken glass, the finest, sharpest of pains, to know what someone’s last words to you would have been.

“Here, Severus, lad, drink this,” Madame Pomfrey said, tipping Snape’s head back quite calmly and pouring a potion down his throat. Then another. Then another, until he choked and coughed and his breathing eased, as he fell into unconsciousness.

“Well,” she said, stepping back and wiping her hands. “That went about as well as can be expected, I suppose.”

She looked around at Harry, at Draco, at Professor McGonagall hovering.

“He’ll be unconscious for ages, now. Out!”

Harry got out, slumped against the wall outside the infirmary, braced his hands on his knees, and tried to breathe. It was like a battle. Weeks of training and preparation and careful, careful potion making, all decided in a few seconds. Professor Snape was alive. He was alive.

Now Harry just had to deal with the possibility of mental tampering, Professor Snape’s reaction to everything that had happened, and also Professor Snape’s reaction to everything that had happened.

Erk.

(It was all very well not to give Professor Snape a vote on your plan for martyrdom, but quite another thing to anticipate explaining this to the man, who would very much think he had a vote, thank you very much.)

“Come flying with me,” Draco demanded.

“I can’t. You know I can’t.”

“Come flying with me. I have dealt with a werewolf and with the possibility of killing my favorite professor this week, you should at least give me the honor of a practice bout.”

“I’m in hiding.”

“Screw your courage to the sticking place, Harry.”

“…who’s been giving you Shakespeare?”

“Hermione.”
“Why.”

“She wanted to demonstrate that people other than me had difficult lives, and she thought the tragedies would help me put my life into perspective.”

Harry could use some perspective right now.

“Did it work?”

“No. They’re all idiots and I would do it all much better. They should make me King of England.”

Harry stared at him.

Draco looked coolly back.

“…have you ever considered humility?”

Draco blinked lazily, visibly considering this question.

“No.”

Ugh, Draco.

Ugh, Draco just saved Professor Snape’s life, Harry was legally obligated to be nice to him or something.

“You know what the worst thing about today is?” Harry asked, straightening to lean against the wall.

“What’s that?”

“I’m no longer technically headmaster of Hogwarts. By the oldest rules of apprenticeships, apprentices can take their master’s roles and responsibilities while their master is ill.”

Draco eyed him.

Harry eyed Draco right back.

“Don’t say it,” Draco warned.

“Lemon drop?” Harry asked, and Draco turned and stalked away.

“I am going flying by myself!” Draco yelled back over his shoulder.

Harry sighed philosophically, and tugged his invisibility cloak on. Life was always better after arguing with Draco.

Professor Snape slept through Easter Break, which Harry spent at Grimmauld Place with Draco and the Malfoys. (They were never speaking of this again.)

Harry went to check on him immediately upon his return, and found the man, for a change, sleeping.

“You could consider waking up this year,” Harry informed the still form in the hospital bed hidden in the back corner of the infirmary. “I’m beginning to go mad imagining all the different ways you’re going to yell at me.”

One dark eye cracked open and regarded him. Harry suppressed the urge to flinch, and walked up to the bed.
“So,” Harry said slowly. “How long have you been faking?”

“I was hardly going to move without understanding the situation,” Snape said, in a croaking voice. Harry’s gaze was drawn to the white scar that wrapped around the left side of his teacher’s neck, reaching from his jaw all the way down to his collarbone. He hadn’t had much throat left. In the muggle world, he would have died. One mistake in potion preparation or application and he would have died.

There didn’t seem to be anything to say.

“Report,” growled Professor Snape, and suddenly there was everything to say.

“Voldemort is dead,” Harry said, and turned to pull up a stool so he wasn’t looming. “Bellatrix LeStrange is leading the largest faction of Death Eaters, with Yaxley taking point controlling the Ministry for them. They’re the Returners, who think he’s not dead, or if he’s dead he’s coming back and they’re staying loyal this time. Then there are the Fatalists, who think he’s dead and this is their last hurrah – they’re committing mass killings and we’re locking them up in Azkaban – the Dementors are on our side now. Sorry, I should do this in order.”

“Returners, Fatalists. Who else?”

“Reformers. That’s Malfoy’s lot. They’re trying to put in place a pureblood regime based around the old blood, not sketchy halfblood maniacs, trying to clear their reputations up for when the mind control at the Ministry collapses in on itself. They’re more or less on my side, which doesn’t make me want to hex them any less.”

“Charming,” Snape whispered, eyes closing again.

“…do you want some food? Ice?”

“Mm.”

Harry got ice, and Madame Pomfrey made him go away for a whole hour while she checked on things.

Harry lurked, and wanted to drink polyjuice and be someone else, and wanted to never have had that thought so Professor Snape couldn’t read it out of his mind just by looking at his face.

#

“We are really at Hogwarts?” Professor Snape had slept again, and then Harry had had to teach classes, but he’d brought his homework and worked on it at the foot of Professor Snape’s bed through the night. It was somewhere after midnight, and it was so worth it, because Professor Snape was awake.

“We’re really at Hogwarts.”

“The Carrows?”

“Er. Locked in a trunk.”

The silence was relatively eloquent.

“Hermione and I have been teaching their classes.”

“Why,” the hoarse voice whispered.
“It kept the Death Eaters away. They think the Carrows are carrying on the good fight here, so… it’s made classes a little tricky, but I’m managing.”

“You are also. Taking classes.”

“NEWTs are, er, coming up. In two months. It’s April now.”

It was quiet for so long that Harry returned to his transfiguration notes, thinking Snape had fallen asleep again.

“What of the Order?”

“They’re keeping busy? Most of them are still under watch, the ones with jobs, so it’s mostly ones who have been put into prison who are having the chance to run around and fight the good fight… and most of those are terrible fighters, so we just have them rounding up stray giants and things, doing auror work since the aurors aren’t allowed to.”

“I meant. The Order and Hogwarts.”

“Professor McGonagall’s been keeping an eye on things.”

“And me?”

“She helped turn you back from stone.”

“I mean,” Snape hissed, “What do they think I am doing here.”

“Well, Professor McGonagall thinks you’re recovering.”

“I am not so ill I will put up with evasion from you.”

“Fine.” Harry stood up so he could look Professor Snape in the face. “Fine, I haven’t told the rest of the Order you’re alive, because you killed Dumbledore and they hate you. Happy?”

“Ecstatic,” Professor Snape purred, voice husky. “I was beginning to think you’d been replaced by a pathetic, agreeable clone.”

“I am trying to be nice, you misbegotten excuse for a teacher!”

Harry was yelling. Harry stopped yelling.

Professor Snape bared his teeth in what was not a grin.

“I neither need nor want your pity.”

Harry opened his mouth to yell, closed it, gritted his teeth. Took a breath.

“You’re right. I’m bloo- really furious with you. You killed Dumbledore. You told me nothing. You played at being Headmaster while students were tortured and sent to Azkaban, while everything fell apart, while I was hunted. You – you joined the Death Eaters in the first place, even though you knew what they wanted to do to people like Hermione. Like mum.”

Snape’s eyes widened, ever so slightly.

“So don’t tell me,” Harry finished very slowly, “I’m not allowed to be nice to you. I am going to be nice to you and you are going to live through this war, and if you don’t like it you can suck on a
lemon.”

“I could swear… that you have been talking to Albus Dumbledore. I had rather anticipated being done with this particular lecture on the unavoidability of kindness.”

“We had a nice chat while I was a bit dead.”

Professor Snape blinked. It was a very evocative blink.

Harry sat down again on his stool, and sighed.

“It’s been a really long, really weird year. Do you really want to argue about who’s done the most stupid things?”

“You,” Professor Snape said immediately.

If this was Draco, Harry would have made a joke about ‘why did I save your life again?’ But this was not Draco. Professor Snape did not have endless depths of arrogance, not about his value to other people.

“I’m really glad you’re alive,” Harry said, because stark truth had always been the ground he and Professor Snape met on, even when it had been the stark, barren ashes of hatred.

“I… look forward to getting back to work.”

Well. Harry hadn’t really been expecting anything well-adjusted, so he supposed he couldn’t complain.
“Hello, Severus,” Professor McGonagall said quietly. Harry jolted out of his doze leaning against the wall.

“Minerva. I see Poppy is a tattletale as ever.”

“She is. She knows I have been concerned. It is not every day the victim of a cursed magical snakebite is cursed to be petrified into stone by an amateur transfiguration expert in order to prevent them dying of bloodloss.”

“Ah. I had wondered.”

“You owe Mr. Malfoy thanks, or….” She could see Snape’s expression and Harry couldn’t, from his seat by the wall. “Or at least a kind word, so that he knows you are not plotting his death.”

“As if a kind word from me meant I was not plotting someone’s death.”

“Severus… Albus?”

Harry realized, as Snape didn’t answer, that Snape didn’t have a ready, silver-tongued explanation at hand. Well, then.

Harry stood up, drawing both of their attentions.

“I can explain that one. I talked to Professor Dumbledore most recently.” Neither interrupted. He came to stand by the bed, on the opposite side from the sleep-robed Minerva McGonagall. “He found a cursed ring that he thought would let you speak to the dead, and he got very excited about talking to his sister. It was a fatal curse, so after that it was just a matter of figuring out how his death could be useful.”

“Severus?”

“He has the main points.”

“I don’t much appreciate him choosing Professor Snape to help with that, but no one asked me, did they.”

“The day I consult with you on a plan of battle is—“ Snape tried to sit up and broke off, grimacing.

“Are you hurt?” Harry asked, keeping the panic out of his voice.

“Spare me your sentiment, boy,” Snape said, slumping backwards into the bed.

“You have been spending too much time talking to Voldemort.” And Harry never thought he’d say that to someone else. “Are you hurt, sir?”

“No. Just… weak.”

Harry knew how Professor Snape felt about weakness. Er.

“Should we leave you alone?”

“Go. I will talk to Minerva without you hovering.”
Harry hesitated.

“Go.”

Harry left, grabbing his things, and felt both like he escaped and like he shouldn’t leave. Obedience, however, was still a habit after all. Even after everything.

#

For another week, Professor Snape confined himself to the hospital wing. Harry heard third-hand about a planned visit from Alastor Moody, headed off by Professor McGonagall. Snape interrogated Harry about the events of the past three months while he had been stone, Harry’s time on the run, and the potions he has used or created to aid Professor Snape’s recovery.

Harry even introduced him to Canary, the yellow bandage potion made with myrtle, which took the form of a small yellow bird and sang a song for the man, while Snape glared at it.

And then there was this exchange:

Snape looked sharply at Harry, after Harry mentioned one of the Army's operations.

"How are you supplying and funding an army?"

"Well, for muggle things like food, er, the prime minister is helping. Sirius got a job working for him?"

"And what job, exactly, is a felon qualified for in the muggle government?"

"He won't say. He just grins and says, 'Black. Sirius Black.'"

Snape looked blank. Harry shrugged.

"It was better than our first idea to make a deal with the goblins."

"...yes. Just a little better."

Or maybe a lot better, judging by that expression.

#

On Sunday evening, Professor Snape was out of bed, dressed, and reviewing papers.

“Professor,” Harry said slowly, “What are you doing?”

“I will be resuming my duties tomorrow. In the absence of a defense teacher, I will be taking the class.”

“I’ve been teaching them fine!”

“Only in contrast to Gilderoy Lockhart.”

Ouch.

“In any case, you have NEWT exams to consider. Hermione Granger will also need to cease this charade, and inform her ‘army’ that they must coordinate with the Order for the duration.”

That probably would mean Harry actually got some sleep that wasn’t curled up in a corner of the
infirmary, but…. 

“I’m really not sure who put you in charge,” Harry said instead.

“Albus Dumbledore.”

“Er. Really?”

“And the Dark Lord That Was,” Snape added judiciously. “One of the few things they agreed on was that I was the appropriate next headmaster of Hogwarts.”

Harry resisted the urge to say, ‘yes, but they were both crazy.’

“Your occlusion is spotty, as usual,” Snape observed in a whisper.

“…er.”

“I expect you in the seventh year Gryffindor classes starting first thing Monday, Potter.”

“If you tell me what this is about.”

“I much preferred you at twelve or thirteen, when you assumed I made my decisions solely to torture you.”

“I grew up.”

“Yes, that is readily apparent to me.”

Wait, what?

Snape continued, “In a war of attrition, the side that can convert others to their cause through spellcraft will win. We must draw them out. You and I are the best bait for that trap.”

“At Hogwarts? What about all the kids?”

“The children can be evacuated when the time comes.”

Harry thought that charmingly understated his own influence over the student body’s attitude towards danger, but he decided to leave it for a surprise. They deserved a chance to fight, too. He sighed.

“Lovely. Bait again.”

“You should be pleased,” Snape said absently. “With the uncertainty of attack, I can’t test your new aptitude for snake venom antidotes on you just yet.”

“…you’re not serious?”

“Mmm.”

Professor Snape smiled at his papers. It was not reassuring.

“I’m sorry about arguing? And, er, getting killed? And nearly getting you killed?”

“You will be,” Professor Snape said, quite cheerfully. “You’re dismissed.”

Harry left the room, contemplating a future where Professor Snape expressed his displeasure clearly
and painfully through the surprise introduction of various poisons into Harry’s day.

Once he was sure Professor Snape couldn’t see him, Harry started grinning, and laughed to himself in pleased anticipation all the way to his quarters. He’d have to pack, if he was going to be Harry Potter tomorrow.
Harry settled into his seat in Charms and got out parchment and quill. To his left, Hermione arranged her things precisely. To his right, Ron made no pretense of attentiveness, wand in hand and gaze flickering across the room. Ron had grown alert, this past year. Harry glanced at the seat behind him where Neville sat, then turned to face the front of the classroom again.

“Ah, Mr. Potter, Miss Granger,” said Professor Flitwick, smiling and twinkling behind his little glasses. “Do you have the homework?”

“Yes, professor;” they chorused, and Hermione handed it in while Harry sat back and watched her back.

He ignored, as Professor Flitwick continued the class blithely, the confused looks and hisses from his classmates, and the students that peered in at him from the hallway. Right now, Professor Snape was teaching his first Defense class. Harry took a breath, and focused his attention on the lesson.

The hilarity of this moment would, after all, be ruined if he showed any reaction other than complete normality.

#

A few judicious hints later (“Oh, I came on the train in September with everyone.” “You know I sell those invisibility candies, you know.”) Harry was firmly rumored to have been at Hogwarts the whole time.

Naturally, the entire Wizarding World knew by lunch time. Harry got all the way through his meal before being ambushed.

“Potter.”

Harry turned, blinked, drew his wand and pointed it at the girl. What was her name?

“It’s Pansy, isn’t it? Pansy Parkinson?”

“That’s right. And I’m turning you in.”

“Oh. Well. Let’s go, then.”

“…what?”

“You’re turning me in, right? Who are you turning me in to?”

“The headmaster,” she said firmly. “I don’t know what’s going on, but he’ll know.”

“Sounds fine by me,” Harry said. “I was getting tired of hiding out being invisible anyway.”

They walked in wary, uneasy silence to the headmaster’s office.

“Headmaster?” called Pansy after they’d passed the gargoyle and were heading up the stairs, sounding far less certain now than she had before. “I brought Potter.”

“Very good, Miss Parkinson,” said Professor Snape, still unseen, from the office above. “You may go.”
They crested the top of the stairs. There was a pile of unconscious Ministry officials on the floor. One of them was bleeding quite profusely, and Snape was bandaging the wound.

“Professor,” Pansy protested.

“You are behind the times, Miss Parkinson,” Snape lectured absently, tightening his improved tourniquet on the man’s leg. Wasn’t that Yaxley? “The Dark Lord is defeated and Potter stands victorious. Always know which way the winds are blowing before committing to a side. I expected more of you, really.”

“But – sir.”

Professor Snape stood up, wiping the blood from his hands with a handkerchief.

“Would you like to test me, Miss Parkinson? I would regret it.”

She paled.

“No. No, sir. I’m sorry to bother you.”

“It’s quite alright. I needed to speak to Mr. Potter in any case.”

Pansy swallowed, looking ill.

“No harm done, Pansy,” Professor Snape said gently. “Now, off with you. Take it as a lesson.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, and fled with very little dignity.

“I forget you can be nice when you want to,” Harry commented, kneeling to check pupils and confiscate wands from the four probably-aurors.

“You seldom inspire it in me,” Snape said, sitting down in the nearest armchair and leaning his head back against it, breathing abruptly unsteady and expression strained.

“…cor, you’re a good bluffer.”

“Idiot. I could handle a schoolgirl like that with no wand and with far less mobility than I have. These, however, were something of a challenge.”

“Should I get Madame Pomfrey?”

“Mm. Yes. For them more than for me.”

“Why not just barricade the floo?”

“Simply put, because this will bother them more. They will wonder what has become of their comrades, and become fearful.”

Professor Snape, Harry was reminded, had cut his teeth in this long war on the side that caused terror. He wondered how they were liking it being turned back against them.

He glanced down at the unconscious bodies as he stood again, satisfied they weren’t going to be attacking his teacher any time soon. Not very much, he thought.

“What did happen to their comrades?”
“Legimency is not a common skill, nor is it commonly defended against.”

Harry considered this.

“I’d like to learn sometime. Properly, not with color commentary from evil.”

“…what was that like?”

Harry tried to figure out how to put it.

“Sort of like looking into a funhouse mirror,” Harry settled on. “Close enough to be disturbing, not recognizable enough to be really scary.”

“You compromised his judgement. Especially regarding Draco and me. He should have killed us years ago, and instead he drew us closer and closer.”

“He… said something to Draco about that, at the end. You – you think so?”

“I have thought so for years, but suspected it best to not speak of it.”

“Oh.”

“Go. Get Pomfrey.”

“Yes, sir.”

Harry went and got the mediwitch, and thought about having literally defeated Voldemort with the power of love.

He didn’t think he’d tell Draco what his special Boy Who Lived powers had been. Draco wouldn’t fully appreciate it, anyway.

#

There were no further attacks that afternoon. Harry went to see Professor Snape in his old office, finding him hunched over a book on his desk.

“Sir.”

“Potter. You neglected to mention your progress on your as yet nameless potion for the curing of the imperius.”

“And the after-effects of dark magic,” Harry added. “Um. I’ve been a little busy.”

“Unless you wish us to strike down half the Ministry, you will focus.”

Oh.

“I stopped trying variations because I was low on ingredients and running out of ideas for alternate versions,” Harry reported. “The last version I had some success with used both blood and tears, and I stewed the pennyroyal in wine beforehand….”

Reporting took a while, and Snape stayed seated and attentive, hands steepled in thought.

“It’s an inelegant concoction,” Snape commented. “But as it happens, it gave me an idea. There is an old potion, suitable for clearing the mind and giving the drinker courage and willpower. If we adjust
it based on your recipe, we will not have achieved your goal, but we may achieve a potion that allows the cursed to fight the imperius if they have a scrap of will left in them.”

“What’s it called?”

“Draught of Valor. Read this while I think.”

Harry read the ingredients and instructions, which were archaic, arcane, and annoying.

Then he read the last ingredient, and froze.

“…martyr’s blood?” Harry asked in a faint voice.

“For obvious reasons, I have been reviewing all spells that use it as an ingredient. You are a rare creature now, idiot.”

“I didn’t think.”

Harry wasn’t sure what he hadn’t thought.

“Obviously. This is what teachers are for, to think when their students are too burdened by their own ignorance to move forward.”

Harry took a moment to mentally translate that.

“I’ll work on that, sir. You think we can make this work in time?”

“I have nothing else pressing. Come.”

Harry found, as he prepared ingredients for Professor Snape, that they still worked well together. Or had they worked well together before? He raced ahead, shredding lily roots and dicing unicorn hair, powdering gladiolus petals and measuring out portions of salt and iron shavings with moonwater. Professor Snape was right that the base ingredients had enough similarity to his own potion to be combined, though he found himself not quite following Snape’s variations as the man took the ingredients and turned them into simmering cauldrons colored in various shades of bronze, gold, and pale sunshine yellow.

Time flew by. Harry was distantly aware he was hungry, but the lure of his art was too strong, and the thrill of discovery and of shimmering vapours held him fast.

“Your arm,” Snape said, and Harry held his left over the first cauldron without delay, palm up. Snape took his wrist, turning it over, and the silver knife bit into his forearm only lightly, and seven drops of blood fell into the cauldron. Snape’s hand on his wrist guided him to the next cauldron, and the next, and the next.

Snape let him go, setting down the knife, and pressed a square of linen to Harry’s finger.

“Cover it. A healing potion would introduce unknown effects.”

“When do we know if they will work?”

“For that, we need test cases. Summon Draco and a test case, if you please.”

Harry debated for a moment before making his choice.

“Dobby,” he called, and Dobby popped into existence looking his usual mix of teary and star-struck.
A short mandatory session of chatting with Dobby later, Harry sent him to ask for Ron and Draco.

Ron turned up first.

“We’re testing a potion on you,” Harry told him, not looking up from his latest batch of flower petals. Stripping them off the flowers was a pain. “Stand over near the wall?”

“You’re lucky I’m used to you when I’m like this,” Harry heard him say, but it didn’t seem like it really required an answer.

A few minutes later and maybe forty flowers stripped of their petals, Draco turned up.

“This had better be important,” said Draco, then paused. “No.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, I’m not even making you drink it,” Harry replied, looking back at his work. Time to switch to crushing the salt crystals into powder and mixing that with the powdered petals.

“Boy,” Snape said, and Harry handed him a small tray of individually measured portions of unicorn hair.

“Cast the imperius on Ron. Make him do something not very engaging, we don’t want it breaking early,” Harry said.

Weigh the sea salt, then transfer it to the mortar and pestle. Crush with a circular, rocking motion, adding the petals to be crushed every third breath. He was almost certain the direction about breathing was just one of those archaic little traditions of messing with people who dared to read your recipes, but you never knew, did you.

“He never jokes in this mood,” he heard Ron say. “You might as well, we’ll get no peace otherwise. Hopefully it’s something relevant, not some new wart cure.”

“Command him to cease prattling,” was Snape’s contribution to the conversation.

“Imperio,” Draco whispered.

The first batch of potions made Ron, commanded to say whatever was on his mind, want to fight a dragon or ask Hermione to marry him. Depending on the version. The sunshine-yellow one let him break it, “But that was because I was getting up the courage to punch the Professor in his honking nose and I’m not suicidal.”

Snape grunted, already in the midst of making the next batch.

“You two don’t have anything else to do tonight, do you?” Harry asked.

“Besides sleep?” Draco asked.

Ron, on the other hand, just sighed and pulled up a stool to watch them work. Ron was a good friend.
Around three in the morning, by Harry’s slightly confused internal clock, it occurred to Harry to wonder why they were staying up all night working on modified draughts of valor.

“Sir? Is there a deadline?”

“Bellatrix will attack with the dawn. She is infected with a taste for the dramatic.”

“…you want to figure this out by dawn?”

“Here is a lesson for you in the proper attitude towards potions mastery. A potions master must win before the battle ever begins, because one cannot pause to brew during a duel.”

“…yes, sir.”

Harry went back to work for a few minutes.

“Sir? Does anyone else know she’s attacking at dawn?”

“The Order is aware. Careful.”

Harry jerked backwards, just barely not colliding with Professor Snape and taking them both to the ground in a tangle of robes and saltwater.

“Sorry, sir, sorry-“

“Sit down and rest. You may have twenty minutes.”

Harry sat down on the floor next to a dozing Ron, pulled his knees up to his chest, pillowed his head on his arms, and fell asleep between one thought and the next. Should Professor Snape be pushing himself so hard, so soon-?

Harry woke up to Draco shaking his shoulder.

“Hn? Are they attacking yet?”

“No. Here.”

Harry looked between the mug of pumpkin juice in Draco’s hands and Draco’s face, which was a cool mask, and decided not to make a comment about servants.

“Thanks.”

He drank it all in one long gulp and then put the mug down on the flagstones, and got back to work.

#

Their last batch of modified draught of valor before dawn was butter-yellow and, indeed, smelled faintly of butter and sunshine.

“That really shouldn’t be physically possible,” Harry commented.
“What?” asked Snape.

“The smell.”

“Spare me.”

Snape was frowning at their cauldrons.

“Is there something wrong?” Harry asked.

“The potion itself is elegant enough, but it lacks elegance in delivery. We will have to hold people down.”

Huh. Delivery. Harry studied the potions, which were slightly pearly-iridescent in their pale yellow splendor. The vapor made him feel confident, as if he could do anything if he just concentrated. Concentrate… focus on the memory of pearly sheens and potions, hook it from your mind like a fish….

Soap bubbles, floating around Professor Flitwick’s classroom, swiftly banned. One of Harry’s very first candy experiments.

“Severus, she has arrived,” a silvery eyeglass-marked patronus cat told Snape in McGonagall’s voice, coming in through the wall in a burst of light.

Harry glanced at his teacher. His face was pale and set, eyes glittering. Snape looked back at him.

“Come. Let us speak to our adversary and see if we can draw her into error. Keep careful mark of the time, we have twenty minutes before these need to come off the flame.”

Snape swept from the room, and Harry followed.

#

Instead of going to the main hall and the main entrance, Snape and Harry headed up and up, until they reached a lookout point on the battlements at the front of the castle.

Bellatrix LeStrange and a circle of Death Eaters were at the locked front gate of the outer wall of Hogwarts, and Harry fought off a flashback to a graveyard, a very long time ago. He’d grown up since that horrific encounter, hadn’t he? He’d died, certainly, and that must mean he’d lived enough first.

Being tired was making his brain think funny things.

“Bellatrix, my dear,” said Snape from the battlements, after a brief spell made communication possible and easy, if loud. “If I had known you were coming, I would have been better prepared. What brings you calling?”

“Open the doors, Severus. I must speak with you.”

The woman’s voice was cold and mad, and reminded Harry strongly of Voldemort. From this distance, he could not see her face.

“Are we not speaking?”

“I will have words with you. You will explain where our lord and master has gone, and how come you to stand there with the Potter boy.”
“My apprentice?” Snape glanced at Harry for a brief, dry moment. “You have not forgotten he is a student, I trust. I have been teaching him.”

“Where is our master, worm?”

“Your master is dead, Bellatrix, as you must have suspected. Perhaps you will join him in death and be together there forever? I certainly could not object.”

“Never. Traitor, cur. He should have put you down, not trusted you – I will see you dead.”

And then it was a matter of dodging an acid-green spell – at that distance, it was easy. The sound of explosions and curses from below began. And the clanking of armor, for some reason. Snape started sweeping back towards the stairs, and Harry followed.

“I had a thought,” Harry said, trying to figure out how worried he should be about all of this. “About the potion distribution. Pouring it on their heads would be awkward. But – do you remember that soap bubble candy I made? The one that let you blow bubbles?”

Snape stopped walking, expression distant. Then he was in motion, striding down the stairs in long, distance-eating strides, almost running.

“Get Sparrow’s Compendium from the Forbidden Section of the library. We are starting over. Run, Harry.”

Harry ran, because Professor Snape never used his name.

#

Sparrow’s Compendium was a huge, leather-bound book clad in iron straps, and it shivered when Harry touched it but did not scream at him. Being the headmaster’s apprentice and a seventh year counted for something, he thought.

As he hauled the heavy book downstairs the potions lab, not quite staggering under the weight, he saw battle being joined outside the window. Giant spiders were fighting animate statues, and what seemed like hundreds of spells, red and green and twenty other colors rebounded across the front lawn.

Harry pulled his gaze away and ran, stumbled on the trick staircase, almost fell, caught himself after a frantic, acrobatic tumble, and continued his headlong dash.

Hermione was guarding the entrance to the potion’s lab, wand in hand, as Ginny and Luna hauled away cauldrons of butter-pale potion. Harry spared her a smile and ducked inside, where Snape was setting out a whole new set of ingredients – lye and ash, fresh myrtle leaves, flowers, and roots, and an array of bottles that Harry knew contained different essential and other oils.

“Good,” Snape said. “Find the section on myrtle. It is organized by element, so it will be under fire.”

Harry swallowed a moment of sheer shock that Snape had told him he’d done well at something. Concentrate. Concentrate, Harry.

He flipped through the book as Snape lit a purple flame under his largest cauldron and filled it with water, beginning to add the ingredients for the valor potion with iron precision.

“Found it, sir,” Harry said after what seemed a very long few minutes. It felt wrong to be here, not out there fighting. To be keeping Ron, Draco, Hermione from the fight, when the fight was
everything that mattered – an end to the war, an end to hiding.

“Read it aloud.”

“Myrtus, known commonly as myrtle, is sacred to Venus and best harvested when she shines brightly in the heavens….”

The language was antiquated, the writing ornate to the point of unreadability. Even a couple years ago, Harry would have had trouble interpreting it. It was detailed to the point of absurdity, but it seemed to mean something to Snape. He pushed away the myrtle leaves and roots and began working on the dried myrtle flowers.

Harry interrupted himself to ask, “Sir, you can’t think you can substitute for gladiolus and live myrtle with dried flowers. Er… can you?”

“Keep reading. The *Compendium* is dependable.”

Harry continued reading, and ended up in a section about the spirit of plants and essential oils that completely lost him, despite him knowing all the words.

“Read that paragraph again,” Snape ordered.

Harry did so, and watched, mystified, as Snape dabbed drops of an oil on the flower petals. It took basically forever.

“What-? Sir, can I help?”

“What-? Sir, can I help?”

“Stand away. I cannot slow down for you this time.”

Despite his words about slowness, Snape was painfully patient as he applied the oil to the dried flower petals. Harry clenched the edges of his stool to avoid the impulse to talk or move or run off to fight, worried that distraction would cost them whatever had Snape as focused as a falcon on the wing.

Then the process of brewing truly began. Snape’s hands swept through the air as gently as if coaxing music from a cello, floating between ingredients and cauldron. Just one cauldron, and it took all of his attention, where the man could usually manage five at once. Harry lost track of the ingredients and steps, despite his careful attention, and could only watch as Professor Snape worked magic. Moonwater with salt and iron, fur and feathers, oil and lye - some of the ingredients were the same as the potion of valor, some steps were from his candy recipe he hadn't even thought Snape knew, and some made no sense whatsoever.

He could have sworn he saw Professor Snape sprinkling flower petals into the cauldron with his eyes closed, near the end.

Chapter End Notes

If your visual of Snape brewing this potion is timed to *Moonlight Sonata*, you would not be wrong.
The Battle of Hogwarts

“There,” Snape breathed, and tapped the side of his cauldron three times in the runic ending of one of Harry’s living potions, then extinguished the flame beneath it. “I hope this was the right decision.”

Harry shook himself into motion, half-hypnotized by the potion’s song, and went to get bottles. Himself, Ron, Draco, Hermione…. He glanced at Snape assessingly.

“Will you be able to fight, sir?”

“I must.”

“You **must** depend on your team,” Harry said, wishing Snape had ever played team sports in school. (On the other hand, if Snape and his father had actually competed against each other regularly, someone would really have ended up dead, and it probably would have been Harry’s dad. So best not.)

“Arrogant as ever.”

Harry ignored this and poured the silvery-iridescent potion into slim bottles while he addressed Draco.

“Draco, could you transform some stirrers into wands for blowing bubbles? That’s a long handle with a little circle on the end, like a miniature Quidditch hoop.”

“Since you ask so nicely,” said Draco. “Sometimes I forget you’re all mad, and then, then I am reminded.”

Harry decided he couldn’t hear Draco when he whined. Bottles of potion and bubble blowers were paired and set on the countertop.

“Should we test it?” he asked his teacher, who was leaning on the counter with his eyes closed. He knew Snape had been overdoing it, he knew it. Discipline was one thing, but self-discipline enough to ignore your own pain and tiredness was just self-destructive.

That thought would probably make some (many) people call Harry a hypocrite.

The door crashed open abruptly, and Harry jumped and went for his wand, pointing it at – Hermione, face pale, hair tied back sharply.

“They’ve broken through the doors to the great hall. The Army is coming up from the back now, but they’re not duelists enough to do more than box them in.”

“We’re ready,” Harry said. “Take a bottle and wand and blow bubbles as you go. It’ll help.”

Hopefully. Probably.

“You’re lucky I trust you, Harry,” Hermione said with a sigh, and collected her bubbles. Harry smiled at her, collected his own bottle, and ran for the battle.

#

Pearly, opalescent bubbles streamed across the hallways and staircases of Hogwarts, spreading with Harry’s small troop, floating with minds of their own towards the nearest cluster of fighters. Harry
saw one pop in Pius Thicknesse’s face, and the man turned without a pause to hex the white-masked figure fighting by his side to the ground, and then charged screaming at the Death Eaters.

So, a few kinks to work out still in this potion, Harry thought through the buzzing in his ears, as the controlled chaos of the battlefield became the utter chaos of people under Imperius switching sides mid-battle, mad with the horrors they had been made to inflict. Maybe combine it with some of the ingredients of a calming draught, next time?

“Weasley!” Thicknesse yelled at his aide. “Next time I’m under the Imperius, you have my official permission to hex me!”

“I’ll need that in writing, sir!” Percy yelled at him cheerfully, casting a bright yellow transfiguration at someone about to hex Thicknesse in the back.

Harry ran onwards.

In the Great Hall Stan Stunpike let out a war yodel and was felled by three killing curses, but his fellow Death Eaters’ distraction allowed Hogwarts defenders to stun all three murderers, one of whom was hit by a pearly bubble as she was crumpling. Unconsciousness cut off her sob.

The battle built, crested, and then - paused.

“Hold!” yelled Bellatrix LeStrange, over the general chaos, and the Death Eaters held, ducking behind overturned tables. She was in a small clear area in the middle of the hall, surrounded by bodies and rubble and facing off against the tall, sturdy form of Neville Longbottom. “What did you say?” she demanded, voice carrying.

“I said I’ll tell you what happened to Voldemort,” Neville repeated loudly.

“Where is he?” she demanded, advancing, wand raised. Harry was too far away to do any good, and there were groups of the fallen and the injured besides. He tried anyway, creeping closer. “Answer me! Crucio!”

Neville collapsed to his knees, and whispered something. Bellatrix stepped closer, hair wild, eyes full of madness. Harry was very close now, but Neville met his eyes and shook his head a tiny, tiny bit.

Harry ducked down behind a chair, and watched.

Neville clutched his wand and gasped, "Mufflato."

Bellatrix asked a question.

Neville said something.

She asked the question again.

He raised his head and spoke again, more loudly.

She opened her mouth and began a spell. Neville reached into his robes.

Harry heard nothing but a muffled buzzing as the mandrake screamed.

#

It seemed to Harry that the battle ended very quickly, but when he looked at the sun later he realized it was past noon, and he had just lost time in potion brewing and running and the odd flow of time
when one had not slept in more than a day.

He found Professor Snape sitting on the staircase between the first and second floors, empty potion bottles scattered around him, Draco sitting by his side. Professor Snape looked completely at his ease, the high collar his black robe combining with his long black hair to hide the white scar that Harry knew covered his neck, elbows on knees, wand held loosely.

“You can’t get up, can you,” Harry said, glaring at his errant mentor.

Snape found the energy to glare back at him.

“I am merely resting, you insolent brat. Wrap your arm properly, you’re dripping.”

Harry looked down at his forearm, which was a mass of bloody linen tied haphazardly. Well, that looked spectacularly awful. It didn’t hurt. Well, it hadn’t hurt until he thought about it. Now it hurt, stinging fiercely, and he realized he was hungry, thirsty, exhausted, and covered in stone dust besides. He wished he hadn't thought about it.

He sat down next to Snape, Draco on Snape's other side, and accepted a fresh square of linen from Draco. Harry began re-bandaging his arm.

“I don’t understand how you made that potion at all, sir.”

“I should hope not. If you understood everything I could do, I would have nothing left to teach you.”

Harry brightened, since that was a very good point.

“So, how did it work?”

“Ah… well, I can explain the general principles,” Snape said, sounding suddenly younger and faintly embarrassed. “I – I should not like you to think that that was proper procedure. I made no notes as I proceeded, and I was, er, ad libbing quite a lot. I’m not… entirely sure I could recreate it.”

Harry paused to savor this moment of humanity from his teacher.

“It worked,” he reported, finishing his bandaging and folding his arm gingerly over his chest where it wouldn’t be jostled. “Er. Aside from the little berserker problem. Battle’s over.”

“Good.”

“We won.”

“Obviously.”

“Neville got Bellatrix LeStrange.”

“…what?”

“Neville Longbottom tricked her into listening to a mandrake’s song from less than a foot away. He put out his own eardrums to do it. He's fine, if temporarily deaf. She’s really, really dead.”

“Bellatrix LeStrange is dead,” Snape repeated distantly.

“Yes,” Harry said slowly, “I just said that.”

“Bellatrix LeStrange is dead. Lord Voldemort is dead.”
“Yes….”

It sounded like a formula, or a mantra. It sounded disturbing, somehow, alarm bells ringing in Harry’s head.

Snape’s breath caught in his throat as his eyes went wide and staring, whites showing all around. A shudder wracked his body, and then another, and another. His breath came in great gasps, until he slumped abruptly back against the steps, a puppet with his strings cut.

Draco reacted first.

“Your name is Severus Snape,” Draco said in a low, urgent voice. “We’re at Hogwarts. It’s April. We just won the battle against the last of the Death Eaters. Your name is Severus Snape.”

Snape sat up, slowly, face drawn in stark lines, dark eyes still wide and staring. He was shaking, and Harry wanted to kill Voldemort all over again. Much, much more slowly.

“I know, Draco,” Snape whispered. “I remember now. Thank you for your assistance. I did not – I did not recall properly, until now.”

“Sir,” Harry whispered. “Sir, are you-“

Snape grabbed the stone bannister and hauled himself jerkily to his feet. He looked between Draco and Harry, confusion and panic locked swiftly behind an expressionless mask.

“I have just remembered something. Pray see to things here. I have an errand to run.”

He strode away as if pursued by demons, and Draco and Harry watched him go in shared silence, before turning to look at each other.

“What,” said Draco, pale and fey.

“The hell,” finished Harry.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The war was over. Pius Thicknesse seemed to still be minister, just quite a bit less evil about it. The castle was a buzz with Ministry officials, medics, and reporters. Harry shamelessly avoided all of them.

There were casualties. Bodies were laid out in the Great Hall, though no one seemed to expect Harry to help with it. He’d been wandering aimlessly for what felt like hours but probably wasn’t, too wound up to sleep and unwilling to be cornered by someone well-meaning to eat or commiserate or have to make decisions.

Harry found himself back in the Great Hall, now almost certain that there weren’t stray Death Eaters hiding about. Or at least as certain as he and the Map could make it. Everyone seemed to be in the Great Hall. The Minister was there, and the entire Weasley clan seemed busy alternatively yelling at and hugging Percy. Sirius and Remus were standing by one of the bodies, over on the other side of the hall. Sirius had his arm around Remus’ shoulders. Harry hurried over to them.

“Remus!” Harry called. “Where’s Tonks?”

He looked down at the body. Alastor Moody seemed very peaceful in death, and Harry blinked hurriedly.

“Actually,” Remus said, looking away, “She’s just given birth. Our son Teddy was born last night. The timing, ah… she wasn’t thrilled with me coming to fight.”

“She’ll get over it, eh? You’re a hero,” said Sirius. “Women like that.”

“Because you know so much about the fairer sex,” Remus said with tired amusement.

“I have a girlfriend, you know. Audrey. She likes me.”

“Does she know anything about you?”

“She knows the important things. Rotten family, good friends, a little bit of trouble with the law that is all sorted out now, good job. Harry.”

Alastor Moody was dead, and Harry should be sad about that. He should be sad about all the people from the Army and Hogwarts that had died, for there were many of them, instead of being guiltily grateful that his loved ones were alive.

“I wonder if Theodore Alastor’s a good name,” Remus mused.

“No,” Sirius said baldly. “But wizard names are all awful, so he’ll fit right in.”

“You should listen to Sirius,” Harry chimed in. “He’s a keen observer of human nature, you know.”

Sirius snorted, and wrapped his other arm around Harry’s shoulders.

“Where’s Beaky, then?”

“If you mean Professor Snape,” Harry said doubtfully, “He said he’d forgotten something and
Harry was too tired to deal with that. Snape would be back, at which point Harry would knock him down until he started making sense again.

“Then all’s well that ends well, huh? Why don’t you go find your friends, and leave cleanup to the politicians?” said Sirius.

“Are you sure?”

“Dead sure. Go on.”

Harry went. Specifically he went to stand with Hermione, who was in the entrance hall dripping a healing potion into Neville’s ears and lecturing the deaf boy on deliberately ruining your own hearing to win a duel. Neville, blithely unaware of this, was grinning. Harry sat down on a stone step and watched with pleased tiredness.

Ron sat down next to him, apparently done yelling at Percy.

“So, you know what this means?” Ron asked.

“What?”

“We don’t have any mysteries or wars to fight for the rest of our time at Hogwarts. Two whole months with nothing but studying and exams.”

Harry contemplated this, frowning.

“I guess we’ll live?”

The door of the main entrance creaked open on bent hinges, making the most awful noise. Harry looked up and squinted.

Professor Snape was silhouetted against the noonday light, shadow stretched black along the corridor flagstones. Harry watched him glide into the school as Harry’s eyes adjusted to the increased light.

Professor Snape was carrying a baby.

“This is my daughter Minerva Delphini,” Snape said matter-of-factly to the speechless group. “Minerva, this is my idiot apprentice and his idiot friends. Never do anything they would do.”

The baby was pretty, for a baby, with a little bit of silver hair covering her scalp and baby-blue eyes, wrapped in a soft-looking green blanket. She cooed and grabbed at Snape’s nose, which was an obvious target for a baby. Harry was no good with baby ages, but she seemed mid-sized for a baby, not the red squashy sort of newborn, but obviously not old enough to be called a toddler.

“Er,” said Harry, trying to figure out how to phrase ‘don’t babies usually come with mothers.’

Professor Snape surveyed them with cool dark eyes.

“That is absolutely none of your business,” he said to all their unspoken questions, and swept past them up the stairs, addressing the baby as he did so. “Come along, Minerva. I need to introduce you to your godmother.”

“Don’t know what we were worrying about, Harry,” Ron confided. “There’s always going to be
something weird going on.”

Harry considered this, absently getting out a packet of lemon drops and popping one of them into his mouth. It sounded about right. There would be exams to take, potions to brew, poisons to frantically find antidotes for, and a great many mysteries to solve, and the whole future stretched out ahead of him with family and friends in it, a weird, unexplored unpredictable vista. When his apprenticeship was over he could try out kissing again. There were no more prophecies about him. He could choose to be anything or anyone he wanted - an auror, a potion master, a candy maker, a teacher, a writer of improved potions textbooks.

When life gave you lemons, you made lemon candy.

THE END

Chapter End Notes

This has been the best, weirdest two month writing experience I've ever had! For those who missed this in one of my other author notes, I do have a few sequel novellas planned, but this is the complete series rewrite in its entirety, and you can skip those if you like. Many, many thanks to all the wonderful commenters who kept me encouraged, yelled at me for making you cry, and told me when I was making you laugh and worry your coworkers. I don't know when the first chapter of Language of Serpents will go up, or if I'll take a bit of a break, or if I'll write weird AUs for a bit. Do bookmark the series if you want to see whatever comes next.

~Wyste

End Notes

Spoilers for those who need them:

Character deaths include Vernon Dursley, Petunia Dursley. I'm mostly curious if anyone will miss them.

Albus Dumbledore also dies, and I will actually miss him. Vincent Crabbe, another for the 'does anyone care' list. And Voldemort, who I weirdly will miss despite him being a completely unredeemable person. Alastor Moody and Stan Stunpike are our last named character deaths. Sorry, guys.

Works inspired by this one

Scrubbing Bubbles by TheTartWitch

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!